

# A WEALTH OF INSIGHT



THE WORLD'S BEST LUXURY HOTELIERS ON  
LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND  
THE FUTURE OF 5-STAR HOSPITALITY

RAHIM B. KANANI

Praise for

# A Wealth of Insight

*A Wealth of Insight* is an enlightening read. One of the most important aspects of the hospitality industry is understanding what drives its leaders, and this book takes you on a journey through *their* eyes and experiences—unraveling their motivations, lessons learned and perspectives on the future. Both in thought and art, this volume details every aspect of a world-class guest experience. *A Wealth of Insight* is intelligently written and comprehensive in its reflection, culminating in an impressive, long-overdue publication of this nature and magnitude.”

—**Dr. Dimitrios Diamantis**  
Dean of Graduate Studies  
Les Roches, Global Hospitality Education  
Switzerland

*A Wealth of Insight* is a study in hard-earned leadership lessons from luxury hoteliers around the world. Mr. Kanani’s interviews take us behind the scenes of a complex industry—revealing the needs, behaviors and demands of both guests and colleagues through the career experiences of five-star general managers who know them best.”

—**Philip M. Barnes**  
Regional Vice President and Managing Director  
The Savoy Hotel, London

*A Wealth of Insight* should be required reading for students enrolled in hospitality management degree programs. It provides an orientation to the ineffable culture and character of hospitality, a thoughtful overview of the challenges of consistently producing excellent service, and many inspiring best practices. The book reinforces the proud traditions of hospitality at a time when competitive pressures tempt some to cut corners that should not be cut. Kanani writes in a direct and accessible style that inspires as it informs, and has created a book that should be on the coffee

table of every hotelier and that should be gifted to every hospitality student upon graduation. A pleasure to read and savor, *A Wealth of Insight* is a reminder of why we love this industry.”

—**Tony Simons**

Professor of Management & Organizations  
School of Hotel Administration  
Johnson College of Business  
Cornell University

“Kanani has written an important book that details the very best attributes and behaviors of truly successful luxury hoteliers around the world. *A Wealth of Insight* should be read by all students of hospitality seeking to understand, from a leadership and luxury lens, exactly what it takes to deliver exceptional service in this industry.”

—**Stowe Shoemaker, PhD**

Dean, William F. Harrah College of Hospitality  
Michael D. Rose Distinguished Chair  
Lincy Professor  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

“*A Wealth of Insight* is a beautiful and meaningful tribute to the art of making people the best they can be. Anyone who loves learning about people—critical for those in the hotel industry, but helpful for any leader—will enjoy these colorful and personal stories about life lessons that informed great leaders in the competitive world of luxury hospitality. Kanani’s insightful profiles prove that the only way a five-star hotelier can ensure a quality experience for both guests and colleagues is by setting the tone at the top and leading by example.”

—**Katherine Melchior Ray**

Former Vice President of Luxury Brands, Hyatt  
Former Vice President of Marketing, Louis Vuitton Japan

*A Wealth of Insight* has much to offer students of hospitality as well as those who simply love to travel. This book will certainly be in our College's library and our reception area."

—**Dr. Dennis Reynolds**

Dean, Barron Hilton Distinguished Chair  
Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management  
University of Houston

"I truly enjoyed reading *A Wealth of Insight*. It is a very inspiring book with many life and leadership lessons for both hospitality students and managers. I highly recommend it to future leaders of this industry."

—**Prof. Fevzi Okumus**

Editor-in-Chief, the International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management  
CFHHLA Preeminent Professor  
Rosen College of Hospitality Management  
The University of Central Florida

"As the luxury tourism industry gains considerable momentum in emerging markets, *A Wealth of Insight* serves as a truly unique reference and guide from five-star hoteliers worldwide on how best to deliver on the promise of an extraordinary guest experience."

—**Lanre Akinola**

Editor, African Business  
Former Director with the Bloomberg Media Initiative Africa  
Former Editor, This is Africa, Financial Times

***A Wealth of Insight:***

*The World's Best Luxury Hoteliers  
on Leadership, Management, and  
the Future of 5-Star Hospitality*

by Rahim B. Kanani

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# A Wealth of Insight

The World's Best Luxury Hoteliers  
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RAHIM B. KANANI



# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> . . . . .	x
<b>Aaron Kaupp</b> —Le Royal Monceau, Raffles Paris (France) . . . . .	1
<b>Adrian Gray</b> —Lotte Hotel Moscow (Russian Federation) . . . . .	11
<b>Alexander Pichel</b> —Hotel Indonesia Kempinski Jakarta (Indonesia) . . . . .	19
<b>Alexander van Gastel</b> —Pulitzer Amsterdam (The Netherlands) . . . . .	27
<b>Amit Majumder</b> —Jumeirah Vittaveli (Maldives) . . . . .	37
<b>Anneke Brown</b> —COMO The Treasury (Perth, Australia) . . . . .	45
<b>Axel Bethke</b> —Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara (Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates) . . . . .	55
<b>Ayman Gharib</b> —Raffles Dubai and Sofitel Dubai Wafi (United Arab Emirates) . . . . .	65
<b>Brian Gullbrants</b> —Wynn Las Vegas and Encore (Las Vegas, United States) . . . . .	75
<b>Christian A. Hassing</b> —Mandarin Oriental, Singapore (Singapore) . . . . .	85
<b>Damien Bastiat</b> —Ballyfin Demesne (Ireland) . . . . .	93
<b>George Cozonis</b> —The Plaza Hotel (New York, United States) . . . . .	103
<b>Gerrit Graef</b> —The Ritz-Carlton, Riyadh (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) . . . . .	113
<b>Graham Ledger</b> —Singita Serengeti (South Africa and Zimbabwe) . . . . .	123
<b>James Low</b> —COMO Uma Paro and COMO Uma Punakha (Bhutan) . . . . .	135
<b>Kai Speth</b> —The Reverie Saigon (Vietnam) . . . . .	145
<b>Krister Svensson</b> —St. Regis Hotel and Residences (Bangkok, Thailand) . . . . .	153
<b>Luc Delafosse</b> —Waldorf Astoria Beverly Hills (United States) . . . . .	163
<b>Mahmoud Skaf</b> —The Ritz-Carlton, Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) . . . . .	171

<b>Marc C. Brugger</b> —Rosewood Hong Kong and Rosewood Beijing (China) . . . . .	179
<b>Marc von Arnim</b> —Park Hyatt Sydney (Australia) . . . . .	189
<b>Mariano Silvestri</b> —Park Hyatt Maldives Hadahaa (Maldives) . . . . .	197
<b>Michael Ziemer</b> —Mandarin Oriental, Taipei (Taiwan) . . . . .	207
<b>Nicholas Yarnell</b> —Six Senses Douro Valley (Portugal) . . . . .	215
<b>Patrizio Cipollini</b> —Four Seasons Hotel (Florence, Italy) . . . . .	225
<b>Pedro Dias</b> —The Surrey (New York, United States) . . . . .	233
<b>Peter Hopgood</b> —Outrigger Fiji Beach Resort (Fiji) . . . . .	243
<b>Philip Barnes</b> —The Savoy Hotel (London, United Kingdom) . . . . .	253
<b>Pinar Timer</b> —Pera Palace Hotel Jumeirah (Istanbul, Turkey) . . . . .	263
<b>Ralph Radtke</b> —Ciragan Palace Kempinski (Istanbul, Turkey) . . . . .	273
<b>Sjefke Jansen</b> —Belmond Grand Hotel Europe (St. Petersburg, Russian Federation) . . . . .	283
<b>Stephen Ansell</b> —Ararat Park Hyatt Moscow (Russian Federation) . . . . .	293
<b>Susanne Hatje</b> —Mandarin Oriental, New York (United States) . . . . .	303
<b>Taljinder Singh</b> —The Taj Mahal Palace, Mumbai (India) . . . . .	315
<b>Tom Roelens</b> —Four Seasons Resorts Lana'i (Hawaii, United States) . . . . .	323
<b>Torsten van Dullemen</b> —The Landmark Mandarin Oriental (Hong Kong) . . . . .	333

# Introduction

While pursuing an undergraduate degree in philosophy many years ago, I developed a hunger for knowledge—not for facts and figures, but for perennial wisdom and insight. Fueled by intense curiosity, a passion for conversation, and a desire to discover the world, I spent nearly a decade distilling leadership and management insights from some of the most innovative and influential chief executives across industries. As I traversed the globe from San Francisco to Stockholm to Seoul, I often laid rest at a world-class hotel befitting of my interviewees. In fact, many discussions took place in glamorous suites, lobbies, and ballrooms.

Over the years, the luxury hotel—symbolic of my travels and journalism—shifted from stage to spotlight. From the moment I arrived, every aspect of the guest experience was carefully crafted, catering to all five senses. It was awe-inspiring, delightful, and flawless. I became obsessed with how such properties balanced intuitive care with military precision, so I turned my attention to pulling back the curtain and uncovering the secret to creating a world-class guest experience. To do this project justice, I needed to interview the

tip of the spear—general managers who have spent decades on the frontlines, rising through the ranks and ultimately stewarding some of the world's most luxurious hotels and resorts. Almost a year from the moment I decided to embark on this journey, I am honored and humbled to say that I've done exactly that.

More than thirty-five of the world's best luxury hoteliers participated in this special effort, contributing many hours of their time and sharing many decades of their experience. Every hotelier profile includes bite-size insights, stunning photography, and real-life examples on recruiting, culture, technology, marketing, branding, personalization, authenticity, anticipation, design, partnerships and more. Their contributions represent the spectrum of a luxury hotelier's mindshare.

Today, general managers are adapting their design and service offerings to meet the needs of a new generation of modern luxury travelers who prize authenticity over familiarity, simplicity over complexity, exclusive experiences over champagne and caviar, and

insider knowledge over high-end shopping—hallmarks of becoming a serious destination authority. In addition, luxury hoteliers now operate in a much more dynamic and immediate environment—working closely with investors as owners to meet expectations of financial performance, monitoring digital platforms to rapidly react to guest feedback, and constantly innovating to differentiate themselves in hyper-competitive markets.

While the very definition of luxury has changed, and the environment in which general managers operate has become increasingly complex, core leadership and management principles underpinning the industry remain intact.

Every hotelier featured in this book exudes a fundamental understanding of genuine human connection. They reveal a mastery in the art and science of recruiting, developing, motivating, and managing a world-class team—explicitly designed to deliver on the promise of personalized luxury at every stage of the guest experience. This is one of the most profound insights to emerge from this endeavor. The most beautiful of hotels in the most coveted of locations cannot deliver on that promise without an extraordinarily passionate and talented team committed to perfection. There is no alternative. In an industry that now Googles guests in advance of their stay to glean personal and professional interests, likes

and dislikes, anticipatory service is not simply possessing information, but acting on it deliberately, thoughtfully, and discreetly.

For aspiring and current general managers of luxury hotels around the world, for hospitality executives in search of a practical guide on how best to deliver a world-class guest experience, and for the modern luxury traveler eager to go behind the scenes, *A Wealth of Insight* is the holy grail of five-star leadership and management.

The search for wisdom continues.



Rahim B. Kanani

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# Aaron Kaupp

GENERAL MANAGER,  
LE ROYAL MONCEAU,  
RAFFLES PARIS (FRANCE)

BORN IN:

Siegen, Germany

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

France, Ghana, Italy

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

24



**“ Harnessing social media to connect with people around the world in a way that sparks an instant daydream is a powerful proposition. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

While born in Germany, I grew up in Switzerland to parents who lived and worked throughout Africa and India. My father was a businessman who dealt in commodities such as rice and sugar. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to travel the world with them and stay at many fine hotels. Through these travels, we would learn about different cultures and customs, and this nurtured a very open-minded and curious view of the world. My parents always told me to strive for the best, and it is that philosophy that continues to guide me today.

#### **THE SPARK**

My first job in the industry was serving breakfast at the Golden Tulip Hotel, and I knew right then that I wanted this to be my career. The combination of

being in regular contact with people, the complexity of running a restaurant, the dynamism and energy required to be successful, and the joy that permeated through the smiles of guests and staff were priceless.

#### **EMPOWERMENT**

Never micromanage your team. They need to be empowered to take ownership and responsibility of their roles. In such a dynamic and fluid operation as a restaurant or hotel, micromanaging leads to setting boundaries, but your team needs to be able to improvise and be flexible. This empowerment leads to mutual trust, and if your team trusts you, they will look out for the best interests of guests and the company more broadly as if it were their own.



## **LEADING BY EXAMPLE**

If the General Manager picks up an empty coffee cup on their way through the lobby, or stays in the office until the middle of the night to greet a VIP guest, that shows dedication and passion. If leadership does not display such commitment, regardless of how big or small the task, that lack of interest will filter down throughout the organization into staff and ultimately the guest experience.

## **PEOPLE COME FIRST**

To build a successful team, leadership must invest heavily in getting to know their colleagues, including their strengths and weaknesses, and celebrate their successes along the way to show appreciation and recognition. This translates directly into the guest experience. At the end of the day, we are in the business of the human touch—in treating both guests and staff. The two are inextricably linked.

Early on in my career, a manager that I was reporting to saw me one day, overworked and tired, but still pulling my weight. He pulled me aside, took me out for lunch, and sent me home, finishing my shift for me. At first, I thought I had done something wrong, but when I returned the next day, ready and rested, he asked whether I felt better. Acknowledging how hard

I was working and being valued for that effort cannot be understated. He took care of me, knowing I needed to be at my best for my department to succeed, even if that meant finishing my shift for me. This is the kind of culture and spirit critical to success.

## **THE HUMAN TOUCH**

Today, we can teach someone to shake the perfect martini or to read a profit and loss statement, but what we cannot teach is the human touch, and being a people-person. When hiring, I inquire about difficult situations applicants have faced in the past at work and how they have handled them. Being able to empathize, reason, and resolve issues professionally, calmly, and intelligently is a very important quality in this industry.

## **ON DAY ONE**

Every new team member participates in a two-day orientation that takes place in the classroom and on the floor. During the welcome, every colleague describes something near and dear to them about the hotel. Feeling integrated and knowing precisely what to do and who to call for help if needed are also critical to a smooth on-boarding. We also make sure our managers sit with line employees individually to



discuss their interests and career ambitions so that we can develop a plan for them to advance and meet their own professional goals.

## CONNECTING EMOTIONALLY

Today, our clients are international travelers who have stayed in many of the world's leading luxury hotels. They are always looking for something familiar or elevated. In other words, luxury today is recreating an experience of what a guest already has at home or would like to have at home. At the same time, luxury means different things to different people. For some, it means that their pillows are monogrammed. For others, their favorite drink is stocked in the minibar or their favorite fruits are served upon arrival. Beyond these gestures, we need to connect on an emotional level to maintain their interest and loyalty.

On one occasion, we had a guest who was traveling solo for business. Our team felt that she really missed her fiancé, having just recently got engaged. While out for dinner, our staff filled her bedroom up with 100 helium balloons with a photo of her soon-to-be husband on each. When she returned, she was not only shocked but moved that we had gone above and beyond to touch her heart in a way that she will truly never forget.

## A CREATIVE TEAM

Simply offering to book museum tickets for guests, something you can generally do online, or sourcing the best restaurants from an online list is not of any real value. You need to offer an experience that's tailor-made to the guest's interests, off the beaten path, to demonstrate your knowledge of hidden gems in the city or ability to curate a unique excursion. We challenge our team to discover what's new and what they would like to do themselves on their days off in the city. They then present their ideas and experiences to me, and if something really stands out as different, interesting, and unique, we integrate that offering into the hotel for guests to enjoy.

## THE FUTURE IS DIGITAL

I've learned that responding immediately to comments, questions, or concerns via social media and key hotel review platforms is critical to success. At the same time, harnessing social media to connect with people around the world in a way that sparks an instant daydream is a powerful proposition. As technology advances, I believe the ability to digitally daydream will be even more instant and even more real. Downloadable virtual videos could inspire a future traveler with sight, sound, and smell, or they could bring back life-like memories of a past adventure.

## DON'T FORGET ABOUT PRINT

While a digital presence is very important, as today's clients are always connected, there is still an audience for printed materials. The brochure is a dying breed, but you can learn a lot about a hotel from such a product: the kind of paper that was used or the pictures chosen to take you on a journey of the property. The sensory experience of a print publication is different, too, and cannot be underestimated. In short, print still matters.

## KNOW YOUR CLIENT

Thanks to the Internet, we can learn more and more about our clients prior to their arrival to try to design a personalized stay. First, we contact their personal assistant in advance of their stay. If that is not possible, we try to find out as much as we can online in advance. This includes social media posts about their likes, dislikes, and recent travels, or articles they may have written. Doing your homework on your guests goes a long way to feeling welcomed. We do this on a regular basis and update our files even if clients haven't returned recently so that we have this information ready for the future.





## AMBASSADORS OF ANTICIPATION

When you are on vacation, you want to disconnect, recharge your batteries, and not think about your plans for the next day or the day after. You want the hotel to do this for you. Anticipation is key to delivering on this notion of taking care of things seen and unseen. If housekeeping, while cleaning your room, sees a couple of books on local excursions, they can communicate that to the concierge who will put something together and present it to the guest even before they ask. We empower staff at all levels to be ambassadors of anticipation.

If a client goes for a run every morning, and the order-taker at breakfast knows this and makes note, guest relations can offer up alternative jogging maps without being prompted. If a client is an avid martini drinker, serving their favorite drink in an engraved glass bearing his or her name is the kind of detail-oriented touch we aim to provide. We try to recreate the home away from home feeling, which in turn makes our guests feel valued and special.

## REWARD ENGAGEMENT

After each shift, we quiz our colleagues on the top three things they noticed about a client, which get recorded in their profile. Staff with the most interesting and substantive discoveries are rewarded with lunch or dinner.

## **INTEGRATING TECHNOLOGY, WISELY**

You can never quite get ahead of the curve with respect to new technology. It comes out overnight. By the time you research it, develop a plan to implement it, and start executing across the property, it is no longer the latest innovation. However, not every new technology should be integrated into a luxury hotel. The key is to offer technology that is both beautiful and functional. It must be modern, on trend, and simple to use for all ages. At the end of the day, you need not be a rocket scientist to switch off all the lights.

## **SETTING THE GLOBAL STANDARD**

Competition is a good thing, but it all comes back to brand loyalty and an emotional connection. Armani, for example, is a lifestyle. When traveling, if given the opportunity to continue that lifestyle in a hotel environment tailored to your interests, likes, and dislikes, you may very well opt for that continuity. Getting the service right is another question. To that end, standard operating protocols of the top luxury hotel operators around the world are being adapted to new brands because they are proven, time-tested practices. It is the legacy luxury hotel brands that still set the global benchmark of design, quality, and service for the industry.







# Adrian Gray

GENERAL MANAGER,  
LOTTE HOTEL MOSCOW,  
(RUSSIAN FEDERATION)

BORN IN:

Edinburgh, Scotland

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Scotland, Russian Federation,  
Israel, Hungary, United Kingdom,  
French Caribbean, South Pacific  
Vanuatu, Bahrain, France

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

37



**“ To understand the evolving needs of young, affluent travelers, hire young colleagues into your management team. They can help you see the future and adapt to change. ”**

### GROWING UP

I was born in Scotland and grew up enjoying the outdoors. We loved to go camping, hiking, and skiing. My parents were always gracious and calm, and had a great deal of integrity. Their outlook on life was guided by asking what they could do for others. We often had friends and family members visiting, two of whom were in the hospitality industry. At the time, one was completing an internship at a hotel in Edinburgh, and the other was going off to study hotel management. I curiously asked about the industry and developed an interest in the business.

### EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

After completing my degree, I began as a receptionist in the front office of the Caledonian Hotel in Edinburgh. The rest of my team had been there for many

years. Only a few months after I arrived, the hotel had been bought and was under new management. Many employees resigned, and I was immediately catapulted through the crisis into a position of responsibility. I trained new receptionists, covered additional shifts, and embraced the challenge. I learned to step up and deliver in a tough situation, gaining the respect of new recruits in the process.

Later, I was promoted to assistant night manager. On my first day in this new role, our computer systems crashed, and in those days there was no IT manager. At the same time, there was a flood in the kitchen of our fine-dining restaurant, which caved the ceiling in on another restaurant below. We could not find engineers or plumbers fast enough. All of this taught me to be tenacious, to expect the unexpected, and manage crises calmly and professionally.



## EMPOWER YOUR TEAM

Once you clearly communicate your organization's objectives, empower your team to make decisions to achieve those results—particularly with respect to guests. As a leader, you need to support their ability to make decisions, and allow them to improvise. Only then will they take ownership in the success of the company—and pride in their work. This pride translates to sharing their culture, joy, and enthusiasm with guests. An empowered staff member makes for a satisfied client.

## ATTITUDE AND AMBITION

I hire people who demonstrate an openness to new ideas, a willingness to develop and learn, and a passion for the hospitality industry. I believe a great deal in first impressions, too, and I often ask several questions related to how an applicant has handled real situations in the past. I also challenge them to explain what they would bring to the role, now and in the future.

## ENGAGE TO MOTIVATE

One of the most important ways to motivate your team to excellence is by involving them in the decision-making process as it relates to operations and

other hotel business. Openly discuss what works, what doesn't work, and how best to improve. This type of candid discussion avoids repeating mistakes. By regularly involving colleagues in key decisions, they will develop a deeper sense of ownership in the ultimate success of the property.

Celebrating and rewarding staff is also a powerful motivator. During monthly team meetings, we present select staff with certificates or vouchers, organize external gatherings, and recognize those who went above and beyond their responsibilities.

### **NO MATTER THE PRICE**

Guests accept differences in price, but not quality. The same minimum standard of service, quality, warmth, and emotional connection apply to all guests, all the time, no matter what category of room. Consistency is something that applies across the board, and not just to those who paid more.

### **PEOPLE ARE YOUR GREATEST ASSET**

Every person on staff has an important role to play in the success of the organization. They all need to clearly understand objectives, mission, and vision. Once internalized, every action they take should reinforce that direction. Your people are your greatest

asset, and if they believe in the work, have a passion for service, and enjoy their jobs, that will automatically translate to guests.

### **LOCAL IS LUXURY**

Quality is a mix of authenticity and personalization. At the end of the day, if our wine list encompassed only the best French wines, our guests would be dis-





appointed. They do want something special, but they also want it to be local and representative of where they are. Therefore, we must take what is local, own it, and then develop it into something personal.

### DIGITAL VS. PRINT

Digital is instantaneous, but print marketing has its place. Sometimes, print marketing serves a kind of confirmation, or reaffirmation, that guests have made the right choice. The sensory experience of a magazine or other print publication will always be important.

### THE BUDAPEST WINTER INVASION

One of the most successful marketing campaigns I've ever been involved in was promoting the winter season in Budapest, Hungary. Aptly titled the Budapest Winter Invasion, it centered on how Budapest had been invaded by the Romans, the Ottomans, and the Soviets, and that they all stayed longer than intended. The offer was that our guests could stay longer, too, because there was so much to see. In short, we would offer the fourth night as a gift to continue exploring. It was not presented as a discount, but rather an extended vacation. We grew our winter business by nearly 30 percent by simply telling a more compelling story

tied to the history of the country. It was authentic, witty, and enticing.

### A SPECIAL NETWORK

While today's concierge may find him or herself in front of a guest who has more information than they do, pulled from all kinds of websites and review platforms, the concierge is the one with the special network of contacts. These relationships allow the guest to secure privileged access around the city that simply cannot be purchased or discovered online.

### PERSONALIZED SERVICE, GLOBAL REACH

We once had a guest who was very famous for his tagline. We embroidered this tagline onto a bathrobe and gave it to him as a gift. He was so excited that he promptly showed it off on social media to his many friends and followers around the world. It was a relatively low lift, but highly personalized, and resulted in fantastic digital exposure.

### SEE THE FUTURE

With the rise of young affluent travelers, you need to adjust and cater to their needs and interests, which are often different from the more traditional gener-

ation of luxury lovers. One of the best ways to understand and adapt to this shift is by hiring young members onto your management team that help you see the future and adapt to change.

## SUSTAINABLE LUXURY

When we think about sustainability and luxury today, we must also think about authenticity. The new luxury traveler craves a localized experience, so if we can grow our own vegetables, produce honey on the roof, or recycle our water to feed our gardens, we are engaging in sustainable practices while creating a more authentic experience.

## HOTELS ARE GLOBAL, RESTAURANTS ARE LOCAL

Food is extremely important to the luxury traveler. However, to be successful, the restaurant and food offerings must appeal to the local market. In many cases, hotel guests desire to venture out of the property to explore the dining scene, rather than stay on-site. Therefore, to be successful, top chefs must cater to both travelers and locals alike.







# Alexander Pichel

GENERAL MANAGER,  
HOTEL INDONESIA  
KEMPINSKI JARKATA,  
(INDONESIA)

BORN IN: Bielefeld, Germany

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Azerbaijan,  
Ukraine, Russian Federation,  
Kyrgyzstan, United Arab Emirates,  
United Kingdom, Argentina,  
Germany

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

30

*Photos Courtesy of Hotel Indonesia Kempinski Jakarta*



**“ In this business, you must always offer experiences that guests themselves could not possibly arrange on their own. You must make them feel special. ”**

#### GROWING UP

I was born in Germany and grew up in an old castle surrounded by a moat. I had a passion for adventure, sports, the outdoors, and exploring. My father was a journalist and my mother was a housewife. My mother most certainly influenced my leadership style. From a young age, her calmness, understanding, and empathy were instilled in me.

#### A SURPRISING PASSION

After leaving high school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I did a couple of internships in the industry after hearing good things from a friend. I gave it a shot, and despite working fourteen-hour days, I fell in love with hospitality. I ended up sending 100 applications for entry-level positions throughout Germany. My mom would drive me around for interviews because I didn't have a driving license.

#### HOW NOT TO LEAD

At seventeen, I was lucky enough to land a position as a bellboy. I then managed to be accepted into the hotel management apprenticeship program at Bristol Hotel Kempinski Berlin, the best hotel in Berlin back in the 1980s. Back then, hoteliers were rather old-fashioned and ran a very tight ship. It was their way or the highway. At first, I looked up to them, but I quickly realized that leaders must show empathy, understanding, and actively listen to their staff. Only then will you be able to gain their trust. A top-down approach without the human touch was not a recipe for success.

#### THE AMBITION TO SUCCEED

I started working as an office assistant at the Hyatt Carlton Tower, then a Park Hyatt Hotel in London. I was savvy with computers, rising to become an IT



manager, then overlooking the entire IT department. Ten years later, I became a general manager with Hyatt. The company believed in me to excel and deliver, and I believed in myself to do the same. Hard work, resilience, passion, and the willingness to learn and be challenged are the cornerstones of success.

### TRAIN, THEN EMPOWER

After training your team, empower them to act. If you are confident you have the right people in place, trust them to do the right thing at the right time. You may have thirty years of experience in the business, but it is your team that serves on the frontlines and most often interacts with guests. Empower them to adapt and make decisions. Similarly, if staff are not encouraged to provide honest and candid feedback about what works and what doesn't, the property will inevitably erode in quality and consistency.

### THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

Aside from reviewing a resume, I ask applicants how their friends and colleagues would talk about them if I asked. I ask about their ambitions and how they plan to achieve them. To that end, I make judgments about an applicant based on their attitude and personality. Not every job requires experience in hospi-

tality. In some cases, you can teach new hires everything they need to know about a position once on board. You just need the right attitude and the drive to succeed.

### EVERY HOTEL IS DIFFERENT

In one hotel, the team you worked with might be perfect, but that same team at another property could be a disaster. A city hotel runs differently than a resort. You need to know in detail what those differences are—managerially and operationally—and you need to be mindful of that when you hire.

### NEVER STOP IMPROVING

One of the biggest challenges in this industry is staying relevant and innovative. Never stand still. You must constantly seek new opportunities to improve your offering in all its forms. The simplest example is IT infrastructure and all the technological expectations travelers have today. If WiFi connectivity is weak in the room, restaurant, lobby, or bar, you will hear about that via guest comments. Similarly, you must regularly refresh the restaurant menus and upgrade the look and feel of your rooms and common areas, otherwise guests will move on to another property that does. Only those that continuously strive for more and better will last.

## **LISTENING IS HALF THE BATTLE**

When a guest experience is not up to par, the first thing you must do is listen carefully and actively—without prejudice. Take the time to genuinely hear a complaint, and empathize with that frustration. Listening is half the battle. Second, you must honestly apologize and offer a solution. You must capitalize on this opportunity to turn an unhappy guest into an ambassador of the property.

## **MORE LOCAL, LESS GLOBAL**

Often, you enter a hotel lobby and forget which country you're in. There is no local culture, artwork, de-

sign, or décor. It could be San Francisco, São Paulo, or Singapore. Luxury travelers are not just looking for a good night's rest, quality service, and a fabulous meal. They want a memorable experience unique to their location.

## **MAKE THEM FEEL SPECIAL**

Whether providing access to a coveted museum before or after working hours, arranging backstage access to the local theater, offering a new but yet-to-be-public menu at a prominent restaurant, or organizing a private fashion show, in this business, you must always offer experiences guests could not arrange on their own to make them feel special.

## **INVESTING IN DIGITAL**

Generally, print marketing is getting less important. Digital marketing is critical. Investing strategically in search engine optimization to ensure visibility has proven to be a solid return on investment if done right. Utilizing other channels, too, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are also important, but you need to understand your target markets to know what works best for each before jumping into all platforms for all people.





### THE STREET FOOD FESTIVAL

With street food being part and parcel of local culture in Jakarta, we decided to organize a local street food festival, engaging a social media company to design a contest that allowed the public to vote on the best street food vendor and dish in town. After the public voted, we worked with the vendors to secure all the necessary licenses and had them cook the winning dishes at one of our restaurants. This has now become an annual event. It was a truly successful campaign to engage the local community and food lovers, drawing them into the festival and ultimately our restaurant.

### THE DIGITAL CONCIERGE

The luxury concierge is here to stay, but the way in which we communicate with them continues to evolve. More and more, direct contact will be minimized. We must accommodate other types of communication such as WhatsApp, Skype, FaceTime, text messaging, and email. Luxury concierges are increasingly adopting these methods to react and respond to any guest inquiry at any time of day or night. We already regularly communicate with our guests via email, and with some of our regulars, we are in constant touch via WhatsApp. In addition, mobile and tablet applications are becoming more popular,

allowing you to request room service, book spa appointments and more with ease and without calling.

## LUXURY AND CONSISTENCY

Personalized luxury hospitality has always been about knowing a guest's preferred food or drinks, preparing the minibar, bathroom, temperature, and lighting to their liking, and noting their preferred seat at a restaurant. It is also about knowing the names of their children and preparing amenities for them, making special note of their allergies, placing a bookmark in an open book and leaving it bedside, seeing that a guest always sleeps on one side of the bed, and only preparing that side during turndown service. The hardest part of delivering personalized service is doing so consistently. That is what sets you apart and ensures a repeat guest.

## THE EXPANDING GUEST PROFILE

To deliver on the promise of personalized luxury, you must know your guests intimately. You do that by asking the right questions. While securing the booking, before your guest arrives, during their stay, when housekeeping takes care of the room, when they're enjoying the restaurant, harnessing the concierge to book any activities, and following their departure.

You must use any and all opportunities to continually learn about your guest, without being intrusive.

## THE HEALTH-CONSCIOUS TRAVELLER

Luxury travelers are looking for a more natural, healthy, and wellness-oriented stay. Consider instituting yoga classes, developing your own herb and vegetable garden, and working with local organic farms to source your ingredients. Such a collaboration is both sought and appreciated. Having a nutritionist on staff to assist and introduce guests to healthy eating habits and a more natural lifestyle is also a welcome offering.

## FROM BEGINNING TO END

The journey of a luxury traveler must be tailored from the moment a guest steps off the plane until they depart. In some countries, you can arrange to meet and greet your guests right at the plane, escorting them to a limousine where a guest relations colleague may join them to answer questions on their way to the hotel. That same colleague might also be the point of contact throughout their stay as a kind of personal concierge.





# Alexander van Gastel

GENERAL MANAGER,  
PULITZER AMSTERDAM,  
(THE NETHERLANDS)

BORN IN:  
Geldrop, The Netherlands

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:  
The Netherlands, Germany,  
Austria, United Kingdom

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

23

*Photo on Left Courtesy of Kirsten van Santen for Pulitzer Amsterdam  
Photos Courtesy of Pulitzer Amsterdam*

**“ The most important thing people don’t realize about this industry is that the soul of a hotel is its people, not the design or technology. You need to create a team culture of belonging and pride to succeed. ”**

#### GROWING UP

I grew up in a family of teachers in a little town called Asten, in the southern part of the Netherlands. Hospitality has always been a part our family's DNA. Our doors were always open to friends, family, and neighbors. We traveled a lot throughout the years, experiencing many different cultures, countries, and cities. I loved constantly meeting new people from different backgrounds.

#### A PASSION FOR PEOPLE

My first job in the hospitality industry was at age sixteen. Every Saturday morning, I served coffee, tea, and eggs in a small hotel with only twelve rooms. I was hooked. I realized my passion was working for and with people. Hotels have been magical for me ever since.

#### LEARN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN

During my studies, I worked at a golf club just over the German border. I was still a student at the time, but worked very closely together with the owner and restaurant manager. They taught me everything I needed to know about running a restaurant, from early morning shift until night. It was an invaluable real-time lesson in the restaurant business.

#### GIVE RESPECT TO GET RESPECT

My first real leadership position was at a four-star airport hotel in London Gatwick when I was fulfilling my Rooms Division internship. I was only twenty and as a trainee I was responsible for the entire night-shift. I learned how to deal with a variety of cultures and personalities, and realized that in order to earn



your team's respect, you must show them that you are working as hard as they are. Earning respect goes both ways.

### **THE FREEDOM TO ACT**

Do not micromanage your employees. Empower them to make decisions. It is important to give employees the freedom to decide, in whatever situation, what is in the best interest of guests. We never criticize such decisions, and whenever mistakes are made we treat them as learning opportunities. Even in such cases where the guest experience could be improved, staff are empowered to take action and resolve issues as they see fit. This stems from a culture of continuous improvement and striving for excellence. Many organizations are afraid to give such freedom to staff, but I believe it is critical to success.

### **MENTORS MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

I had two mentors throughout my career that were critical in developing my professional life. Each took me under their wing. They believed in my abilities, trusted me to learn from my mistakes, and over time, entrusted me with greater responsibilities. Seek out people who are willing to advise you, guide you, and teach you. You will look back on such relationships as instrumental to your professional growth.

### **A SPARKLING PERSONALITY**

Over the last few years, I have focused less on an applicant's resume and increasingly on attitude. Someone's smile and sparkle, and their natural motivation, are extremely important. Knowledge can be imparted, but an attitude towards the industry, towards people, and towards life is harder to change. At the same time, you must be mindful of the various personalities on your team, and ensure any new hire will complement the others, including their potential manager.

### **EVERYONE A STORYTELLER**

For new hires, we organize a range of interactive trainings and educational sessions, including games and role playing. Additionally, one of our concierges, who holds the key to all the hidden gems and secrets of the city, takes all new employees on a storytelling tour through the neighborhoods of Amsterdam. Lastly, they visit the Canal House Museum to learn about the history of the UNESCO canal belt, in which the Pulitzer Amsterdam is located.

This is part of our effort to train and empower all members of our team to become storytellers. It begins from the moment a booking is made to when they checkin physically, to when a porter guides them

to their room, to when they sit for breakfast and beyond. We are constantly sharing interesting insights and happenings in and around the neighborhood.

More than seventy employees, or a third of our team, have been with the hotel for more than thirty years. They know all of our regular clientele and teach the company's DNA and history to all new recruits.

### MILLENNIALS LIKE CHANGE

It is important to understand the ambitions and goals of your team so you can tailor a professional development roadmap for each member. The younger generation in particular is eager to explore different positions after relatively short periods. It is important to understand their motivations and try to accommodate them to maintain interest and loyalty.

### RAISING THE BAR

Over the last ten years, guests have rightly become more critical, and their expectations have increased. Prior to their arrival, they are already armed with vast amounts of knowledge about the property as well as the other properties in the area. This comparative insight puts every aspect of your hotel in the spotlight, for better or for worse. The bar has been raised across the board.

### INVEST IN HUMAN RESOURCES

One of the biggest challenges in this industry is hiring the right person for the right job at the right time. To do this well, you must go beyond a human resources department, which primarily focuses on administrative tasks. You must invest in dedicated people who focus on training, development, and recruitment. Without the right people in place, you simply will not succeed.

### BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR

Pulitzer Amsterdam is located in the middle of the city, and we have more than 200 direct neighbors. Our relationship to them is critical to the success of our hotel. During a recent renovation of the property, we introduced the "Pulitzer Neighbor Discovery Card" to thank all those around us for their patience throughout this process. The card entitled them to a 15 percent discount at the hotel's restaurant Jansz, Pulitzer's Bar, and our lobby-garden café Pause. This proved to be a very successful way to engage our neighbors and show that we appreciate their partnership.



## THE POWER AND PERIL OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In our industry, we need to understand social media and other digital platforms in a comprehensive way. It is not confined to a review on TripAdvisor. The younger traveler, in particular, shares their entire customer journey online—soliciting ideas on where to stay on Facebook, sharing their booking on Twitter, posting photos on Instagram, live-streaming their experiences on Snapchat and beyond. The influence of these platforms cannot be understated and is only expected to grow.







Hotels are put under pressure by individuals with a large number of social media fans and worldwide followers, most of whom have never stepped foot in your hotel. It is therefore hard for a hotel not to grant their wishes because they fear a negative review or experience would do far more damage than not complying. Everything shared is from the perspective of the poster, so two-sided context is rarely ever possible. Dealing with these kinds of situations is one of the biggest challenges we face as an industry.

## LUXURY TRAVEL IS GETTING MORE PERSONAL



Over the last three years, we have expanded the number of concierges at our property from four to six. Guests are increasingly interested in arranging activities and restaurant reservations far in advance of their stay, rather than upon arrival. This requires more manpower. At the same time, today's guests are interested in connecting with a local expert who can guide them to hidden gems of the city not found or recommended online.

The concierge is now chief curator, as there is too much information online to sort through. They also serve to reaffirm the choices of travelers who have truly done their homework on how best to experience the city.

## **SUITES THAT TRANSPORT GUESTS**

As part of our recent renovation, our designer created five Extraordinary Suites, in which he had the freedom to completely customize the rooms to his own creativity. The five suites are story-based. We have the Book Collector's Suite, the Antique Collector's Suite, the Art Collector's Suite, the Music Collector's Suite, and the Pulitzer Suite. Each one transports guests into a truly special surrounding, embodied in history and culture. It is also a unique selling point, attracting many new guests to the hotel.

## **GOING ABOVE AND BEYOND**

A certain percentage of our guests are marked as VIPs in the sense that they may be celebrating a special occasion, represent a particular travel agency, or have a specific occupation. They all receive a welcome surprise, but more broadly, we try to go above and beyond to create unique and memorable moments for all guests. For example, one of our guests loved the movie *The Fault in Our Stars*, which was filmed in Amsterdam. We sketched out a route for her through the city that covered all of the locations in the movie. We also have a kids' program for all ages with a focus on the family travel, which includes personalized pillowcases, balloons, board games, travel diaries and more.

## **DIFFERENT ORIGINS, DIFFERENT PREFERENCES**

Emerging market travelers are focused on A-list destinations such as Rome, Barcelona, Berlin, Paris, and London. They used to appreciate or even demand that their native breakfast be served at the destinations they were visiting. In a relatively recent shift, they are becoming more adventurous and open to experiencing local tastes. Such travelers spend more money on souvenirs, European brand clothing, and taking pictures to share on social media platforms.

On the other hand, seasoned travelers are moving to more unique and secondary destinations, spending most of their money on the journey itself, like flying first class, staying in five-star hotels, and placing a value on experience rather than on possessions. Overall, customers are willing to pay for the convenience and comfort of a travel agent, as the use of travel advisors has skyrocketed.





# Amit Majumder

GENERAL MANAGER,  
JUMEIRAH VITTAVELI,  
(MALDIVES)

BORN IN:  
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:  
Maldives, United Arab Emirates,  
Singapore

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:  
17

**“ Our signature restaurant, Swarna, was initially planned to be a small Tandoori grill, but based on input from our guests, my team, and the owners, it was developed into a lavish restaurant consisting of three private cabanas and one chef’s table. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I was born in Kolkata, India, and when I was young my father would travel a lot for work. He allowed me to join him on business trips during the holidays. I loved visiting new places and meeting new people. My mother, too, loved traveling and experiencing new places. She was always surrounded by travel magazines and books, and continues to write a travel journal. As a family, we traveled every opportunity we could, and I developed a love for exploration.

#### **A PASSION TO SERVE**

My first job in the hospitality industry was with Oberoi Hotels and Resorts at Rajvilas as a food and

beverage associate, which is a fancier name for a waiter, barman, and butler combined. The company put an emphasis on becoming multi-skilled. Early on, I developed a passion for guest service. I also learned the importance of each and every role, no matter how small, and the value of teamwork in achieving success.

#### **AN INVALUABLE LESSON**

My first leadership position was at Jumeirah Dar Al Masyaf in Dubai, which was a sprawling resort, and was similar to managing a number of small hotels simultaneously. It quickly became clear that with such a large and complicated operation, we had to constantly train and mentor our staff, otherwise we would fail. The best way to do this was through MBWA, or Man-



agement by Walking Around. We needed to be as visible as possible to seek feedback from customers and colleagues alike, answering questions and resolving issues swiftly. Walking around and being available to listen, learn, and support is one of the most important lessons I ever learned.

### **RECIPE FOR SUCCESS**

You can only be successful in an environment where everyone feels respected, demonstrates integrity, has the right skill set for the job, is fully responsible for their actions, and is empowered to contribute to high-level decision making. In addition, a healthy, candid discussion among the broader team helps us think outside the box and ensures that we are continuously reinventing our services and offering. Combined, this is the recipe for success.

### **HARDWARE VS. SOFTWARE**

You can have the best “hardware” any luxury hotelier could imagine, including a beautiful property with impeccable furnishings and a stunning décor. But if you’re lacking in the best “software,” such as a team that doesn’t possess the right attitude, training, or passion for service, you will always set yourself up for failure.

### **KNOW YOUR TEAM, INSIDE OUT**

As a leader, respect is earned, and one of the hallmarks of respect is knowing your team well. You must have a complete understanding of their jobs, their pain points, what inspires or motivates them, and how to instill the confidence they need to be empowered and to take full responsibility for their roles.

### **OPPORTUNITY IN CRISIS**

When the SARS epidemic continued to spread in Asia, hotels were practically empty. Apart from a few health officials, there were no guests. People were losing their jobs in the hotel industry all over Asia, and this forced us to think about how best to save the jobs of our colleagues while also how best to handle the crisis. We saw an opportunity and convinced our shareholders to invest in a refurbishment of the property. With an empty hotel, what better time to expedite a renovation, opening renewed as a fresh product that commanded higher rates. In a few months, without any loss or displacement of business, we did exactly that. You must adapt when the goal posts move.



## A WARM WELCOME

At Jumeirah, we have company orientations and more resort-specific training for all of our new recruits during their first three months. Not only do we regularly check in on the new colleagues' job satisfaction, but we also check in on their personal satisfaction. Are they happy with their accommodations? Do they feel welcome and appreciated as a new member of the team? Are they aware of all the facilities available to them on-site? We also ask them, and their immediate supervisor, if the on-boarding process itself was sufficient. Never miss an opportunity to improve.



## BLOW OFF SOME STEAM

Colleagues need a break once in a while to refresh their minds, so we arrange gatherings for both junior and senior teams each month. These social events provide me a chance to interact with everyone in a more relaxed atmosphere, giving me an opportunity to get to know them better without discussing work. Genuine friendships are often formed or reinforced in informal environments.



## BENDING THE BRAND

Staying relevant and true to the brand is one of the biggest challenges to our industry. In response to the different needs and demographics of new travelers, luxury hotels are challenged with how far they're willing to bend their own brand to adapt and evolve.

## BETTER THAN HOME

Luxury hotels are supposed to be a step up from the consumers' own homes in every respect—design, décor, technology, and facilities. While the well-heeled consumer can change aspects of their home more frequently, luxury hotels often struggle to swiftly bring those changes to their properties on a wider scale. At Vittaveli, we have an advantage being in the Maldives. Not many people in the world can have an island home, steps away from the most beautiful white, sandy beach, clear blue waters, and thriving reefs. We coupled that with expansive villas, large private swimming pools and open bathrooms, high-speed Internet, music and video content, twenty-four hour butler service, and more. We also realized that people from the city do not generally ride bicycles on a daily basis, so we introduced them on the property and they became an instant hit. We are now working on a large, outdoor theatre and an ice skating rink.

## A REWARDING CAREER, AT A COST

Working in the luxury hotel business affords you the opportunity to travel the world, meet new and important people, and enjoy the very best food and drinks, but it does come at a price. There are no nine-to-five jobs in this industry. It takes dedication, commitment, and long working hours. If you do not have a passion for guest service, I would not recommend this industry to you. In order to succeed, you need to be a true people-person.

## INNOVATION REQUIRES INPUT

Our signature restaurant, Swarna, was initially planned to be a small Tandoori grill, but based on input from our guests, my team, and the owners, it was developed into a lavish restaurant consisting of three private cabanas and one chef's table. Months after we opened in 2015, it was awarded best Indian cuisine in Asia. Similarly, we are now planning to introduce the first-ever ice rink in the Maldives—an eco-friendly rink using material that does not require to be cooled, thus minimizing our carbon footprint. The rink will allow guests to go straight from a swim in the warm Indian Ocean to gliding gracefully along a magnificent winter wonderland, breaking the traditional concept of a Maldives resort holiday.

## **EMBRACING THE DIGITAL FUTURE, WITH CAVEATS**

A feature on social media might have an immense impact in the moment, while print articles tend to have a longer-lasting effect on readers. Certain print publications are associated with prestige and positioning. Social media, however, has altered our perception of luxury. We have had social media influencers stay at our resort and posting to two million people online, which is more than most print publications can claim. While reaching customers has become easier, competition has become fiercer.

In this new world, with social media being ubiquitous, we now look out for guests posting about our property online. For example, we had seen that a guest staying at our property shared that he just got engaged, so we contacted the couple and arranged a private symbolic wedding ceremony including a photo shoot for them to memorialize their stay.

## **VIRTUAL REALITY**

In collaboration with Google in 2015, Jumeirah introduced the “Jumeirah Inside” platform, which made all of our hotels available in virtual reality. Guests and partners could pre-experience the hotel before booking their stay. We were the first hotel brand to broadly

adopt this new technology for all of our properties, demonstrating our ability to be innovative and embrace the future.

## **PARTNERSHIPS WITH PURPOSE**

When partnering with others for help in strengthening your brand image, do not settle on something that is a passing fad. Choose something that will have a lasting association that you can be proud of many years from now. Any branding must also enhance your identity rather than distract from it.

## **ANTICIPATION IS CORE**

True luxury is having what you’re merely thinking about be presented to you before you voice that desire. Every luxury brand invests in, and creates, mechanisms to track the preferences of their guests, but what sets each of them apart is how that information is used. Beyond having guidelines for how best to observe and document preferences, it takes a lot of training, a keen eye, and the right attitude to intuit a need and take action. A perfect employee for the luxury segment is the one who notices that the bathrobe, for example, is a bit too long for the guest, takes it down to the seamstress to alter its size, and then discreetly places it back on the bathroom hanger.





# Anneke Brown

**GENERAL MANAGER,  
COMO THE TREASURY,  
(PERTH, AUSTRALIA)**

**BORN IN:**

Sydney, Australia

**SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:**

Australia, Indonesia, Cambodia,  
India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan,  
Philippines, Turks and Caicos

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:**

22

**“ Most luxury travelers living in highly-commercialized worlds are thirsty for unique, authentic, local experiences. Embodying the local culture is critical to our success. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

As a family, we traveled frequently. When I was a young child, we lived in Jakarta for two years. I learned to speak Indonesian, fell in love with the people and the country, and developed a passion for the hotel industry when I was just twelve years old. While on holiday with family in Bali, I sketched out a beachside resort. My father was my greatest guide. He always encouraged me to be confident and to pursue academia, guiding me to university and ensuring I received a solid business education.

#### **THE JOB OF A WAITRESS**

At age eighteen, my first position in hospitality was as a waitress. I still today believe the best hospitality people start in food and beverage. You are forced to handle stressful situations that need immediate

responses. For example, you need to deal with time pressures of a busy restaurant, prioritizing many tasks, handling complaints from guests, handling demands from the kitchen, dealing with money, working long hours, being on your feet all day, learning how to communicate effectively and efficiently, learning to empathize with strangers, and much more. The food service industry is truly a gateway to a successful career in hospitality.

#### **PROBLEM MEETS SOLUTION**

One of the hallmarks of my management style is encouraging colleagues to come to me with not only a problem but also a suggested solution. When presented with a challenge, I ask them what they would do and what they think is the best option. I want them to think for themselves, yet always be there to provide guidance.

## CULTURAL NUANCES MATTER

My first leadership position was serving as the reservation manager for Amanresorts, Indonesia. This was a dream role, and I was responsible for seven staffers. I was based at Amanusa in Bali, and all my staff were Balinese and Indonesian. Because I spoke Indonesian, I was able to quickly build rapport with my team and earn their respect. However, I was young and had yet to earn their trust. I quickly learned the cultural specifics of both Balinese and Indonesian staff. It was in this role that I learned the importance of “face” in Asian cultures, and the need to discipline in private.

## AN ENGAGED TEAM

All staff must understand the importance of engaging in the guest experience to ensure that each and every guest is treated to a truly memorable stay. Engagement requires care and concern. An engaged staff can also identify when a guest experience can be improved, and can take action themselves to resolve any issues with a service or offering.

## THE SECRET TO DELEGATION

Developing your staff to take on roles of increasing responsibility comes down to delegation. You need

to identify those who are ready to take on additional tasks, select them, train them, trust them to deliver, observe their efforts, and ultimately provide feedback. Delegation empowers and opens the door for stars to shine. It is also a smart strategy for any succession planning to be effective.

## THE PERFECT CULTURAL FIT

You must respect, integrate, and embrace the managing team around you. As they ultimately run day-to-day operations, include their voice and ideas in all key decisions. When selecting senior managers, it is critical that they be the right cultural fit, which is the most important aspect of any business. When the management team is a perfect cultural fit, each person understands and embodies the essence of the vision and values. They work together, support each other, and contribute their insight and experience to important decisions.

## MENTOR MATTERS

I had one primary mentor who played a significant role in my career. His name was Guy Heywood, and at the time he was the general manager of Amankila in Indonesia. He taught me everything he knew about the luxury guest experience, supported my growth



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through the ranks, and even gave me my first general manager role. He saw the talent within me early on and nurtured it over many years, introducing me to key management personnel for Aman Resorts. I thrived on the trust he placed in me, and I learned everything I could from him. The main lesson he taught me about the luxury market was never to cut corners on the guest experience when looking for efficiencies in the business. Cost saving strategies should never be at the detriment to the guest experience.

### HIRE FOR THREE TRAITS

I hire for personality, personality, and personality. I look for gracious people who are confident and passionate. I try to avoid arrogance or ego, as this will work against you in the hospitality business.

### ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES

As a leader, you need to be aware of when your staff goes through tough times. When it's so busy and the team is exhausted at the end of their shift, they know that I will step in and support them, no matter what the task. The most important thing is that the guests are looked after. If that means clearing a table of empty plates because the waiters are all tied up, or lifting a piece of luggage because the porter is looking after



someone else, then this is what leaders must do. You must never stand back and let your team falter. Your staff will never forget that assistance, and the loyalty they'll show simply because they witness you practicing what you preach will be invaluable.

### **SMALL BUT MIGHTY**

One of the biggest challenges to leading a luxury hotel in a country like Australia is the associated costs of delivering a high-quality service where the labor cost is extreme. This results in delivering a luxury experience with a very small team, which can only be effective if you double-down on recruiting multi-

skilled people, and regularly invest in their professional development.

### A BOTTLE OF WINE CAN'T FIX

When the experience is not up to par, the best action is personal attention and speaking directly to the guest, ensuring you understand all of the details so that your solution is relevant. The worst possible option in a complaint situation is to send a note of apology and a bottle of wine. This rarely solves anything. When a luxury experience goes wrong, you need to correct it, and compensate without question.

### DO YOUR HOMEWORK

If you're interested in joining the hospitality industry, work while studying. Put yourself in the industry while you're learning it. This will be challenging on your time, and will teach you how to manage it more effectively. Then when you apply for the role you want, show your passion, do your homework and learn as much about the company as you can in advance, including experiencing their product. Eat at their restaurant, book a room, and make sure the company and its values speak to you. If you're just looking to get your feet wet, offer to work a few shifts on a trial basis.







## AUTHENTICITY IN ACTION

Everything we create is based on the local experience, and that's what makes us unique. Our food, wine, amenities, and minibar are filled with local products. We work with local businesses, sharing the story of our city, the history of the area, and curating itineraries that celebrate our surrounding. Most luxury travelers living in highly-commercialized worlds are thirsty for unique, authentic, local experiences. Embodying the local culture is critical to our success.

## CELEBRATING LOCAL

One of our most successful marketing campaigns to date was titled State Makers. It was a campaign that celebrated the very best of local experiences by connecting, in our buildings, guests with artisans and craftsman around us.

## STORYTELLING, NOT JUST PRODUCT

True luxury hotels are about experiences. In heritage hotels, like ours, there are wonderful and very unique stories from within the buildings. For example, one of our suites is called the Cabinet Room, and it was in this room that the State Cabinet sat, discussing and determining the direction of the State. If only those walls could talk.

## ONCE UPON A TIME ...

During the final months of the restoration of the State Buildings and COMO The Treasury, we were contacted by a gentleman who once worked in the treasury department in the 1960s. In fact, he met his wife working in these buildings. I took him on a site tour wearing a hard hat and boots, and we walked the corridors. He shared with me wonderful stories of his working days, and that he was planning to book a room to celebrate his 43rd wedding anniversary as a surprise for his wife.

We invited them to stay as our guests—a small gesture to thank him for the incredible history he had shared with us. We allocated one of our suites. The room housed the chief accountant's office, the same room that he would deliver documents to daily during his years as a clerk. During our tour, he said that every anniversary he would play a couple of songs from their wedding. We loaded those songs onto an iPod in the room and had them playing as they entered. His wife was in tears. Later during their stay, she had been to the gift shop and had shown interest in the locally made porcelain tea set. The shop owner contacted me and we wrapped the tea set, gifting it to the guests at turndown for their anniversary.



# Axel Bethke

GENERAL MANAGER,  
QASR AL SARAB DESERT  
RESORT BY ANANTARA  
(ABU DHABI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES)

BORN IN:

Heidelberg, Germany

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

United Arab Emirates, Germany,  
France, United States, Austria,  
China, Jordan

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

30

*Photos Courtesy of Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort*



**“ A genuine relationship between an employee and a guest cannot be manufactured. It can only be formed organically in an environment that prides itself on personal interaction and authenticity. ”**

#### GROWING UP

I grew up in a small village in the countryside near Heidelberg, Germany. My aunt was in the hotel business, and when I was twelve she started taking me to discover national and international luxury hotels over long weekends. Being exposed to the industry at such a young age, I developed a passion for traveling and exploring other countries, cultures, and traditions.

#### SMILING MATTERS

My first job in the hospitality business was an internship as a waiter at a luxury hotel in Hamburg. I learned that while it was important to have the technical skills for the position, it was more important to have the right service attitude towards guests. A smile makes all the difference.

#### KNOW YOUR TEAM

When I was twenty-five, I became restaurant manager of a one-star Michelin restaurant in Germany. It was my first serious leadership position, where I was in charge of fourteen employees. The learning curve was immense, but I realized I had to learn as much as I could about each and every employee. What motivates them? What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses? I needed to understand everyone individually so that I could inspire them, support them, and set them up for success.

#### BE A ROLE MODEL

As a leader, we must display the values we want our colleagues to emulate—honesty, respect, integrity, commitment. Particularly in the service industry,





when these values are shared and embodied in an authentic way, the resulting environment translates into more meaningful engagement with guests.

### LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

Even in our remote location, 35 percent of our guests are repeat customers. I am convinced that this is because our guests and employees develop a friendship, and that personal level of hospitality is very hard to find. Our colleagues across the board are valued as individuals. They share their family stories, experiences, and hobbies with our guests, who do the same in return. A lasting relationship is formed during their stay, and that kind of relationship cannot be manufactured. It can only come organically in an environment that prides itself on personal interaction and authenticity.

### TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Before making important decisions, take a few days to reflect on your options. Think about the decision from different angles, seek more information, and consult with colleagues and close friends for advice and insight. This will avoid a narrow-minded approach and lead to the best possible decision.



## RADICAL HONESTY

It is never wise to oversell a customer, and it is disastrous to oversell an employee. When it comes to people, you must make sure that they want to stay with you or work for you for the right reasons, and not just a polished sales pitch. If you mislead people in either case, you'll feel it in your bottom line, and fast.

## LEARN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN

My aunt, who was a general manager of a hotel in Germany, had great insights. She instilled in me the importance of hiring good people, being an active listener, and remaining humble. Later on, I had the pleasure of working for a three-star Michelin chef, also in Germany, who taught me the essence of quality, how

to deal with difficult colleagues, and how to survive in a very competitive environment. Even at age forty, when I joined Kempinski in Beijing, the Managing Director of the hotel took me under his wings and helped me understand the Chinese mentality and how to deal with institutional owners. When people with more experience and insight offer to teach you, always say yes, and learn as much as you can.

### **RECRUIT WITH INPUT**

When hiring new colleagues, I always involve the existing team. The right cultural fit is very important to maintain momentum, keep the team motivated, and continue the success story. In addition to ambition, I look for warm-hearted people with a positive attitude. People without aspiration are usually not a good fit, particularly for leadership positions. Being people oriented, driven, and sincere are also equally important.

### **DEMAND AND SUPPLY**

One of the biggest challenges to leading a luxury hotel is the rapid growth of this upscale market. Many companies are under pressure to succeed as they are publically listed. They see growth as one of the best ways forward. The number of new luxury hotels in some cities is already surpassing the demand, and

therefore room rates are dropping, leading to even fiercer competition. When room rates are under pressure, revenue streams are under pressure, and luxury hotel operators are challenged to decrease expenses to remain profitable.

### **THE GAME HAS CHANGED**

In the beginning of my career, it was a special experience to stay at a five-star hotel, as they had a wide range of offerings like afternoon tea, lavish brunch buffets, pillow menus, luxury bathroom amenities, butler service, and limousine service. This type of service was only available at landmark properties. Now, our guests in the luxury segment live in beautiful homes, drive expensive cars, have the latest technology, and consume the best food. The question now is how we can still surprise them.

We overcome this challenge by becoming acutely aware of what our guests are looking for. Today's luxury travelers are eager to experience the country, culture, and tradition of the destination, something they simply cannot get at home. They are looking for authentic, local experiences, such as a Bedouin restaurant next to a dune featuring Arabic cuisine, or camel treks with overnight stays in the desert, where guests enjoy stargazing while our astronomy experts explain the galaxy.



## KILL THEM WITH KINDNESS

When a guest experience is not up to par, you must first understand the nature of the issue and the source of the problem. If it is a guest complaint, you must be an active listener showing genuine concern. When guests are angry, you must kill them with kindness. You must be sincere and honest. You must make them happy again swiftly and totally. In cases like this, staff empowerment is a critical element to make things right without involving leadership. Afterwards, you can investigate the issue and figure out what went wrong so that you can fix the root cause. Once you have a solution in place, you must share it across the team so that the mistake or issue doesn't happen again.

## THE PROS AND CONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is essential these days, whether we like it or not. A strong presence on major social media platforms is vital, but content has to be chosen carefully. Done the right way, we can influence our audiences with very creative messaging and receive positive responses. However, the downside is that everyone is now a travel writer, and by merely writing about or posting a photo of something, that may not tell the full story. Omissions or distortions by individuals can cause real damage to a business.



## WHAT THE DIGITAL WORLD CANNOT REPLACE

While guests have an abundance of local, city-specific information online to dig through prior to and during their travels, the role of the concierge cannot be replaced. They have a personal network that the

Internet cannot mimic. They assist guests with special requests on a daily basis, and know the secrets of the city that may take hours for guests to discover on their own. They provide a personal touch in real time and can create unique, tailored itineraries. That is the essence of luxury, and the digital world cannot replace this offering.



## **SURPRISING AND CARING**

In general, a personal touch definitely makes the difference for a guest. We always coach our employees to be surprising and caring. For me, the future is to continue to make it easier and more convenient for our guests in whatever way possible. If technology is available to the advantage of our guests, we will use it, but we must make sure the basics are in place first. Nothing is more personal than the sound of your own name.

## **INTERVIEWING GUESTS, INFORMALLY**

Anticipating the needs of guests is the best way to demonstrate excellent service and to make guests feel cared for. Nevertheless, it is difficult to teach anticipation and even more difficult to execute it consistently. Conversation is the best way to understand our guests and their preferences. This is why we emphasize this topic so much when we're coaching our staff. We are constantly in a dialogue with our guests and have endless opportunities to interview them about their likes and dislikes.

We once had a regular guest who would spend a few months at our property near the end of the year through Christmas, but on his latest visit, he could only stay until the end of October given oth-

er obligations. He was quite upset that he couldn't spend Christmas at our hotel, so a few days prior to his departure, our team organized an early surprise Christmas party in his suite. We all celebrated with him, and it was one of the best moments of my career. Anticipation at its best.

## **DINING BY DESIGN**

Today, we are witnessing a very high demand from our guests on the quality of our food. Guests still like to recognize what's on their plate, leaving molecular cuisine to the experts. They do appreciate a good range of different dining options, including what we call dining by design, which are tailored menus served in a unique and private setting. Nowadays, guests are very knowledgeable about food, ingredients, and how to prepare a good dish. They do like to explore new flavors, but they also appreciate the basics if done well.



# Ayman Gharib

MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
RAFFLES DUBAI (UNITED  
ARAB EMIRATES)

SOFITEL DUBAI WAFI  
(UNITED ARAB EMIRATES)

BORN IN:

Beirut, Lebanon

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

United Arab Emirates,  
Qatar, Lebanon, Syria

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

20



**“ I always encourage my team to use their creativity and discretion when looking for opportunities to wow our guests with memorable, unexpected moments. ”**

### **GROWING UP**

I grew up in the southern part of Lebanon, in the beautiful city of Sidon. As a child, with all these amazing beaches nearby, I spent the majority of my time with family and friends enjoying the outdoors. My upbringing in Sidon encouraged me to travel and explore the world beyond Lebanon. With my father being a certified teacher in the early 1960s, my parents instilled in me the importance of education, hard work, and commitment to excellence.

### **LESSONS OF A STEWARD**

When I first joined the hospitality industry, I started as a steward in a luxury restaurant chain in Lebanon. My main responsibilities were washing dishes, peeling onions, and polishing champagne glasses. This job taught me the fundamentals of the industry, coupled with patience, perseverance, and determination. You

need to understand the basics of the business to be successful.

### **A LEADER AT TWENTY-ONE**

My first leadership role was as a Restaurant Manager at Kempinski Hotel Ajman in the UAE. I was just twenty-one, and it was my first time working overseas. This was a major milestone in my career, as it was the first opportunity I had to lead a team that comprised people from many nationalities with diverse backgrounds. I soon understood that each person has their own set of strengths and weaknesses. As a leader, you must discover the right balance to achieve success while bringing the best out of everyone on the team. People work and learn at different speeds, too, and you need to accommodate for this. This was also a role in which I learned the importance of empathy. Ultimately, you should treat people the way you wish to be treated.





## A SHARED VISION

As a leader, you must communicate a clear vision to your team, focusing on the strategy and tactics necessary to achieve specific goals. Everyone in the organization needs to thoroughly understand these shared goals in order to positively contribute towards that vision. They must also be included in the decision-making process to define that vision. Always opt for being inclusive rather than exclusive.

## OPEN DIALOGUE

To this end, I have a regular open dialogue with senior management where we discuss expectations, challenges, and how best to resolve them. Similarly, these kinds of discussions take place between my management team and their colleagues. In addition, we have monthly colleague engagement meetings, quarterly town halls, and other moments to communicate successes and challenges, ensuring we're all aligned. This culture of open communication and dialogue is driven by a desire to continuously improve and deliver a seamless and outstanding experience for our guests. It is not driven by rulebooks and a desire to control.

## THE POWER OF EMOTIONAL LUXURY

In a competitive market like Dubai, it is our colleagues, the service they deliver, and the emotional bonds they develop with our guests that differentiate us from the competition. This results in about 40 percent of our guests returning time and time again. I believe that true luxury is about how our guests feel when they stay with us—something we call emotional luxury.

Our colleagues engage and share with guests, and take the time to make each one feel important. I always encourage my team to use creativity and discretion when looking for opportunities to wow our guests with memorable, unexpected moments. I want our guests to feel like Raffles is their home and we are their family. In fact, repeat guests who have developed longstanding relationships with their butler, shisha sommelier, or spa therapist will often contact them directly to arrange their next stay.

## MORE IMPORTANT THAN EXPERIENCE

When we recruit for new positions, we start with an online talent assessment to help identify high-potential candidates. During the screening process, the recruitment team uncovers what motivates the applicant, why they would like to join Raffles Dubai, and

what their reasons are for leaving their current role. Experience is important, but even more important is the impression left by an applicant after a face-to-face conversation. Over the years, I have often found that an individual's personality, attitude, potential, and desire to grow by learning the fundamentals has proven to be very important to professional growth.

## LEARNING FROM NEW STAFF

When a new colleague joins our team, depending on their experience to date, the onboarding process can take two to six weeks—both in the classroom and on the job. New team members learn about the hotel, our brand values, our service promise, the history of the Raffles brand, and our parent company, AccorHotels. After the first six weeks, they are scheduled to meet with human resources to discuss their early experience and team acclimation. This is also a chance to better understand how the onboarding process can be improved. The best way to learn these insights is by asking those at the beginning of their journey.

## CELEBRATE TO MOTIVATE

We have a variety of ways in which we celebrate colleagues who have gone above and beyond their du-



ties to deliver outstanding service. Accolades include Colleague of the Month, Colleague of the Year, and Most Mentioned Colleague. On a weekly basis, too, we highlight a Raffles Champion.

### A FRIENDLY SHADOW

We have a very successful initiative called “Gemba Day,” based on the Japanese word meaning “the real place” and the management concept of personally observing a specific area of work. My senior man-

agement colleagues and I spend a day shadowing a colleague in one of their operational departments to experience their daily routine and to gain a greater understanding of their challenges and rewards of their particular role. Colleagues across all departments value the time we share and then use that opportunity to suggest ideas for them to be even more effective.

The effort was so successful that we launched a “Reverse Gemba Day,” offering colleagues the opportunity to shadow senior management roles to inspire and motivate them to progress professionally.





## INVEST IN YOUR TEAM

I strongly believe that one key to success is investing in your team. One of the ways we do that is by enrolling colleagues in courses to strengthen their skills in areas that will benefit their development while also addressing the needs of the hotel. In addition, working in a multinational hotel group like AccorHotels gives our leaders and colleagues the opportunity to participate in cross-training programs at sister hotels and brands around the world. This exposes them to new ideas and ways of working that further expand their knowledge and experience.

I also encourage my team to attend seminars and conferences in the hospitality industry and in their specialized fields in order to learn about new trends in the market. In order to continue being a market leader, we need to consistently innovate to stay ahead of the competition. Professionally developing the team while driving future success of the hotel is a win-win.

## THE PARTNERSHIP EFFECT, WITH AFTERNOON TEA

One of our most successful campaigns was a partnership with Manolo Blahnik, the luxury shoe brand, for our popular Fashion Afternoon Tea called The Collection. Our pastry chefs created a themed afternoon

tea incorporating the essence of Manolo Blahnik's hand-crafted signature pieces, including the classic Hangisi pumps. Menu items included peach praline chocolate stilettos, a yoghurt panna cotta, a sour cherries hat stand, and blueberry blushers to name a few. The collaboration was incredibly well-received by guests and resulted in a 20 percent year-on-year increase in afternoon tea sales, coupled with over US\$135,000 in positive media exposure.

Another highly successful campaign was in 2012, when Raffles Dubai hosted a showcase of the world's most expensive black diamond dress, worth US\$4.5 million. It was created by British fashion designer Debbie Wingham. We launched a one-off themed Black Diamond Fashion Afternoon Tea to coincide with the showcase, as well two indulgent Diamond Spa Treatments at Raffles Spa. The campaign was a tremendous success. It created a great buzz in the city as well as an array of global media coverage.

## ANTICIPATION AT ITS BEST

We once had a regular guest who was about to make his first visit to another Raffles property overseas. To surprise him and his family, we flew his regular butler to the hotel so that when they all arrived, our colleague would be waiting to welcome them to their room and take care of them during their stay. The children ran right up to him and everyone immediately felt at home. Thoughtful and surprising gestures like this create an emotional bond between our hotel and our guests, and are an important contributing factor to building and retaining guest loyalty.





# Brian Gullbrants

EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT  
AND GENERAL MANAGER,  
WYNN LAS VEGAS AND ENCORE  
(LAS VEGAS, UNITED STATES)

*Recently Named Executive Vice President,  
Operations for Wynn Boston Harbor*

BORN IN:

Chicago, Illinois, United States

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

United States, Japan, China,  
Indonesia, Korea, Egypt

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

20

*Photos Courtesy of Barbara Kraft and Jeff Green for Wynn Resorts*



**“ The experience economy is booming and we need to provide conversational currency to our guests. In other words, access to unique and exclusive experiences found nowhere else. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up in the back of our family-run restaurant in Chicago, playing in the storeroom with all of the boxes after big deliveries. Over the years, I witnessed my parents' unbelievable work ethic. It didn't seem like they had jobs as much as they were always taking care of the restaurant, its guests, and our employees as though they were extended family. It was just their way of life.

#### **SURGICALLY CLEAN**

When I was seven, my father convinced me to pick up the trash in the parking lot and throughout the landscaping. I would get paid a dollar for every cottage cheese container that I filled up. I learned how humbling this task could be, and how a clean place

is paramount in hospitality. This is probably where my desire for uncompromising levels of cleanliness comes from, or as I refer to it with our staff, all areas must be “surgically clean.” To this day, I still pick up trash everywhere I go throughout the property. At the restaurant, I went on to dishwashing, food preparation, and became a busboy and then cook. It was a true family affair.

#### **A FOUNDATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

My first job in the luxury hotel industry was as a server at The Ritz-Carlton, Phoenix. It was the first time I internalized the notion that we were all ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen. I was taught the basics of how to anticipate the needs of guests, how to provide genuine care, and how to focus on every aspect of the guest experience. I also learned

how important all five senses were to delivering that experience. I find myself today relying on many of those concepts, standards, and values that I learned long ago.

## CATALYTIC MOMENTS

After studying communications in college, I took four months off to travel throughout Europe and North Africa. It was one of the most amazing and educational experiences of my life, being exposed to such diverse foods, cultures, and traditions. Upon return, I landed the role of assistant manager of room service at The Ritz-Carlton, Huntington Hotel in Pasadena. That was the moment my career launched. From then on, I continued advancing throughout the company.

## GOOD INTENTIONS ONLY GO SO FAR

My first leadership role was as a room service supervisor. It was a humbling experience that I thought I was ready for. However, one morning, more than half of my team called off their shifts, and even after calling a couple of people directly, I couldn't get anyone to come in. I decided that we would all work harder and faster to get the job done, and that was a very poor choice. When orders were endlessly back-

ing up, I learned that no matter how good you think you and your team may be, you cannot win a war without soldiers. Good intentions only go so far. You need a solid team, and from that point on I was never understaffed.

## THE DAILY MESSAGE

My daily message is one of the most successful efforts I've instituted to establish clear and candid communication with all staff. It started when I was general manager of The Ritz-Carlton, Orlando Grande Lakes, during the construction phase and pre-opening to keep everyone updated and aligned. It was so well-received that I've been doing it ever since.

For nine years here at Wynn and Encore in Las Vegas, seven nights a week, I wrote a brief daily message to the whole team to communicate our values, culture, mission, and how to bring these concepts to life. Leadership teams are required to begin each shift by discussing the daily message with their colleagues. The message itself can be directive, informative, motivational, or inspirational. Sometimes it might just be a quick shout out, thank you, and a job well done. I believe this is an essential part of creating an open dialogue and shaping a culture to drive excellence.





## LEARNING WHAT NOT TO DO

Early on in my career I was an assistant manager of a restaurant. On one particular morning we were slammed for breakfast. Several people called out of their shifts and I was the only food and beverage leader on the property—or so I thought. Just as I was trying to calm down a very long line of guests waiting to be seated, the food and beverage director came by and commented about how exceptionally busy we were. I asked him for help and he simply walked away without a response, and made absolutely no effort to call in support. I will always remember that day. It taught me a lot about being there for your team, having integrity, and leading by example.

## A TRUE MENTOR

I had the privilege of working for John Toner, who was then general manager of The Ritz-Carlton, Kapalua in Hawaii. He served as a mentor and truly believed in my ability to perform, learn, and grow. One day, after an incredibly busy effort, John summoned me to his office. There were airline tickets sitting on his desk, which worried me as we were on an island. He told me to go home, pack up my things with my wife and daughter, and disappear for the next few days. The stack of airline papers were round-trip tickets to a nearby resort for three nights plus a bonus check for spending money. I was blown away. Here was someone who believed in me, invested in me, and undoubtedly appreciated my contributions.

## DEMAND PERFECTION

If you ask for excellence, you'll get a job well done. But if you demand perfection, you'll achieve excellence. I have witnessed this time and again, observing and working for very successful leaders that achieve greatness. Those who demand more get more. You must set a high bar. It will surprise you how much a team or an individual can achieve when they are stretched, encouraged, and have no limits.





## MOTIVATE ME

In order to motivate your team, you need to help them understand why their role is significant to the success of the overall operation. Simply expressing your appreciation for something specific goes a very long way to motivate people, though providing rewards and formal recognition are powerful, too. Understand that everyone is motivated differently. People come from different nationalities, backgrounds, cultures, and upbringings, and what may be comfortable or motivating for one may be off-putting or even embarrassing for another.

## LEARN THE ROPES FIRST

Most college students who have just invested four years or more of their time, effort, and money into learning the industry want to move directly into a leadership role upon graduation. This is a big mistake and very dangerous in the longterm. It's vital to have real, practical experience in a line-level hourly job—or a few of them—to be able to understand and relate to many of the challenges that your staff face or will face in the future. You simply cannot lead them without having their perspective.



## THE FUTURE IS MOBILE

I can't remember the last time I used a desktop, laptop, or even a tablet to do almost anything. I use my phone for 99 percent of all my online needs, and I believe most of society has moved or is moving in the same direction. Therefore, smartphone and mobile technology must be incorporated into the overall service experience, including a powerful and friendly mobile website along with a robust application for reservations, room service, and other needs. That is a minimum in today's competitive luxury landscape.

## SHAKEN, NOT STIRRED

Most luxury hotel brands track preferences, but what's more important than just delivering that preference again and again is ensuring that those preferences are accurate and genuine. Just because I order a martini doesn't necessarily mean I love them or that it's a preference of mine. It may be the first time I've ever tried one. If I ask for a dirty Grey Goose martini straight up, slightly chilled with three olives, that sounds more like a preference. And if I order that again tomorrow night, it is definitely a preference. But don't get caught up in only focusing on prefer-

ences. It is equally important to balance preferences with exposing guests to new products, services, and experiences.

## THE EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

The luxury travel experience is no longer just about gourmet food, fine wine, and thread counts. We now live in the experience economy, in which we need to provide conversational currency to our guests. We need to be able to provide access to unique and exclusive experiences. It's about creating moments that are post-worthy for Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram. We want our guests to be blown away, elated, and so excited that they want to share what they experienced with others.

## JETS AND LIMOS

Unlike any other hotel in the world, we own private Gulfstream aircraft that have the ability to fly direct international flights, along with the largest fleet of stretch Rolls Royce Phantom limousines in the world. From beginning to end, we focus on the entire journey. Our 24/7 butler teams have catered to the most demanding, well-travelled guests on the planet. We do it right, and our guests expect it.







Photos Courtesy of Mandarin Oriental Singapore

# Christian A. Hassing

AREA VICE PRESIDENT  
AND GENERAL MANAGER

MANDARIN ORIENTAL, SINGAPORE  
(SINGAPORE)

MANDARIN ORIENTAL, KUALA LUMPUR  
(AREA RESPONSIBILITIES)

MANDARIN ORIENTAL, JAKARTA  
(AREA RESPONSIBILITIES)

BORN IN: Vienna, Austria

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Singapore, Denmark, Norway,  
United States, Malaysia, Turkey, Japan

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 45

**“ Never underestimate the power of a genuinely caring, curious, and kind human interaction. It is part and parcel of the luxury experience. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I was born in Austria, where my father was assigned from Denmark to launch Scandinavian Airlines in the 1950s. With my father's expanding responsibilities, we subsequently moved to Stockholm and Copenhagen. My mother studied languages and became a certified translator in English and French, while also speaking German, Russian, Polish, Swedish, and Danish. As a result of my parents' international outlook and skillsets, I gained a more global perspective on life.

The then glamorous airline business allowed us to travel and explore many exciting destinations, stay at luxury hotels, and dine at gourmet restaurants throughout Europe. Looking back, this was certainly a privileged time, and I developed an early interest in the lifestyle of luxury hospitality.

#### **STARTING OUT**

I joined the hospitality industry as a bellboy, progressed to the telephone department, and then to the reception of the hotel where I was offered two apprenticeships. The first was working in the restaurant and bar, and the second was in the kitchen. In these early roles I learned the importance of discipline, adhering to standards, and paying strict attention to detail, how demanding the hotel business was, and how to consistently meet a variety of high expectations.

#### **PAYING IT FORWARD**

I jumped into apprenticeships and readily helped colleagues in need, thinking that support would be appreciated and pay long-term dividends. It did. A fellow apprentice who graduated before me, and who had since progressed to director of food and bever-

age, offered me the position of assistant manager of food and beverage.

### THE GOLDEN RULE

As expectations tend to change with new generations, it is important to anticipate such changes and to adjust as needed. When I first joined the hospitality industry, guest service was meant to be subservient and restrained. Times have changed. Today's interactions with guests are friendlier and more sociable. I often encourage colleagues to simply treat guests the way they wish to be treated.

### KEEP YOUR COOL

When leaders outwardly panic or display stress in challenging situations, this can have a virus-like effect throughout the organization. When assuming my first general manager role, the stress of the position made me ill-tempered. Having detected a growing nervous tension among colleagues during my property rounds, I commented to my assistant that staff morale and spirit seemed to be low. She told me that everyone was concerned about the future of the hotel because of my worrying and anxious demeanor. I didn't realize that my stressful appearance could impact 800 colleagues. The next few days, I

very calmly made my rounds, greeting colleagues with a smile and a sense of care. To my surprise, the cloud of worry immediately lifted.

### A SHIFT IN HIRING

In the past, executives were predominantly focused on hiring candidates based on their skillsets and appearance. This is no longer the case. Today, we look for executives who have the right attitude—individuals with a certain independence, curiosity, and initiative. We like self-starters who are eager to learn, contribute, and roll up their sleeves. Shortlisted candidates are now invited to complete an online assessment that has been customized to that particular role and covers issues like problem-solving, service orientation, EQ and IQ capabilities, leadership potential, as well as cultural fit and alignment with the guiding principles of the organization.

### ROOM TO GROW AND LEAD

It is very important to create a positive and rewarding work environment that offers high-impact learning opportunities for colleagues that enable them to grow professionally. Meaningful growth opportunities are therefore being reviewed on a regular basis, and could include a fully sponsored MBA certification by





the company. In addition, executives who show leadership potential are also empowered to innovate and develop their skillset by being assigned to either lead or join a group of junior managers and others tasked with improving operations. They then present their recommendations to the senior management team.

### **LABOR SHORTAGE**

The effect of more and more hotels within a given marketplace tends to result in insufficient labor, either due to foreign labor restrictions by local governments or by the shrinking availability of individuals willing to join a service industry that requires them to

work evenings and weekends. This is a true challenge for the industry.

### **MARKETING FOR A GOOD CAUSE**

The most successful marketing effort of the Mandarin Oriental has been the “He’s a Fan/She’s a Fan” campaign. Launched in 2000, the campaign raises Mandarin Oriental’s brand awareness globally, connecting the well-recognized symbol of the fan with international celebrities who regularly patronize the property. As an appreciation for their support, the company makes a donation to the individual celebrity’s charity of choice.

### **CONCIERGE AS INFLUENCER**

The role of the concierge today is not to curate information from books, magazines, and online guides,

but to gather first-hand knowledge, allowing them to tailor guest itineraries in accordance with what they are looking to experience. Concierges now take on a more personal and interactive role in the life of a guest, becoming influencers and all-around destination experts.

### **THE HUMAN TOUCH**

While automation, applications, and other technologies have provided new opportunities for the luxury travel industry to boost efficiency, technology cannot replace the human touch nor the personal relationships developed between our guests and colleagues. Never underestimate the power of a genuinely caring, curious, and kind human interaction. It is part and parcel of the luxury experience.



## **SURPRISE AND DELIGHT**

Our colleagues call most of our guests by name, going the extra mile to seek out their preferences in order to provide more personalized services. Guests do not simply dine at one of our restaurants. They are presented with custom touches such as a framed photo or a customized birthday cake. If a guest has an early flight out the next morning, we will provide them breakfast boxes to go. In the luxury hotel business, every detail matters, and every detail will be remembered.

## **DISCONNECT, THEN RECONNECT**

In a world where everything is digitized and you're constantly connected 24/7, going offline is the new luxury. Now, itineraries, services, and amenities specifically designed to inspire guests to disconnect and re-evaluate their relationship with technology are the most sought after. With this in mind, we have curated spa packages and encourage guests to sign up for private yoga lessons by skilled personal instructors in the hotel's fitness center.

## **GOING GREEN**

Eco-friendly products and services are increasingly taking center stage and will continue to grow in

significance as climate change and related issues are addressed. We are committed to contributing to the communities in which we operate, and to responsibly manage our environmental impacts and social commitments. To this end, we have established a Green Committee that regularly analyzes how we can operate in a more eco-friendly manner.

## **THE EPICUREAN EXPERIENCE**

Food has always played a role in the luxury hotel experience, and it has since evolved into even more fine and experimental cuisine. The most important thing is to create and deliver a memorable epicurean experience, and the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group takes this very seriously. The 2016 Michelin Guide awarded 16 Michelin stars to eleven of our restaurants worldwide, again achieving the most Michelin stars than any other hotel group on earth.





# Damien Bastiat

**GENERAL MANAGER,  
BALLYFIN DEMESNE  
(IRELAND)**

**BORN IN:**

Dax, France

**SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:**

Ireland, France, United Kingdom

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:**

20

**“ When hiring, I have long realized that an agreeable, open-minded, caring personality and empathic nature are attributes you either have or you don’t. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up in the southwest of France riding bikes, enjoying the seaside, and motorcycling on weekends. From the age of fifteen, I worked at a local restaurant. My mother instilled in me that hard work and dedication are the keys to success, and to always learn by doing and that no task is beneath anyone. “Walk before you run,” she would say, steering me to start at the bottom of the ladder and work my way up.

#### **LEADING DIVERSITY**

I started my career as a *chef de rang* in a two-star Michelin restaurant that was part of the Relais and Chateaux group of hotels. I learned early on that working as a team can be quite challenging when people come from different generations, backgrounds, and skillsets. With different expectations of workloads and

work-life balance, different educational backgrounds and different cultures, leading such a diverse group of people proved challenging. I realized then that hospitality was 100 percent about people, but it was the rapport one has with the guest that drew me further into the industry.

#### **GETTING IT RIGHT, EVERY TIME**

My first management position in the luxury hotel industry was at Hotel du Palais in Biarritz, France. The toughest lesson I learned in this role was how to understand and manage guests’ expectations. We needed to deliver the highest possible level of service at all times, whether a guest was a world-traveler who knew exactly what they wanted and were accustomed to a certain level of luxury, or whether they had saved up to take a very special trip of a lifetime. The latter, in fact, may even have higher expectations than the



former, but we need to be consistent in always exceeding those expectations. There is no room for mistakes.

### PROMOTE, BUT DON'T ABANDON

As you build and grow your team, you become increasingly familiar with hiring, managing, and promoting employees. At the same time, I learned that when you identify a young, promising colleague ready for advancement, do not simply promote them and hope for the best. They still need guidance and

training to convert them into great managers. It is a different skillset that must be taught. Do not assume it comes naturally. If the extra guidance and support is not given, in-house or otherwise, you are setting them up for failure.

### REINFORCE CORE VALUES

Hospitality is a very transient industry. People move on or move up on a regular basis. In order to maintain core values, culture, and standards, you need

to institute regular and open communication about those very topics. You must lead by example and surround yourself with colleagues to internalize the essence of your brand, vision, and values. Everyone is an ambassador of the property, so you must reinforce that essence with regularity.

### **LISTEN TO YOUR MENTORS**

My restaurant director in France, Loic Glevarec, pointed me in the right direction and encouraged me to move to the UK to learn English. Looking back, that was the best move of my career. I broadened my horizons abroad, explored many opportunities to learn and to grow, and there was an atmosphere there encouraging success. In France, I would have encountered a sentiment of jealousy in the same pursuit. My second mentor, Mourad Ben Tekfa, was the restaurant director of Le Manoir Aux Quat' Saisons in the UK. He taught me that leading and managing was not about being dictatorial, as I was taught, but about bringing your team along with you. It was about being inclusive, empowering, and respectful.

### **FIRST ONE IN, LAST ONE OUT**

During my time at Gildeigh Park in the UK, both Sue Williams, general manager when I first started, and Michael Caines MBE, executive head chef, had an



enormous impact on my personal and professional development. I was always curious and ambitious, and would ask a lot of questions about how things were done. Being there first in the morning and the last to leave in the evening allowed me to spend time with them. They saw that I was eager to learn. They took me under their wings, coaching me through operations management and eventually in becoming general manager.



## YOU HAVE IT, OR YOU DONT

I tend to get involved with all recruitment at the hotel, not because of a tendency to micromanage, but purely because we mostly recruit for personality over skill. We believe we can teach people the tasks at hand. However, I have long realized that an agreeable, open-minded, caring personality and empathic nature are attributes you either have or you don't. This is

why I insist on meeting most applicants, as these attributes are key to the service we want to offer. Naturally, a chef will need to know basic cooking skills and a sommelier will need to know the various grape varieties, but their personalities will make the difference in the final selection process. I always ask two questions when hiring—describe yourself in three words, and why should I employ you over other candidates?





## FORMER GLORY, RESTORED

With authenticity and locality playing ever-more important roles in hospitality and luxury hotels in particular, Ballyfin is fortunate in several ways. As an ancient home restored to its former glory, the finishing and décor across the entire property were done to reflect how aristocracy would have lived in the 1820s. In addition, sixty-six colleagues of our eighty-five member team are local staff who attended Ballyfin when it was a school, between 1928 and 2002. This very much adds to the guest experience.

## LIVING THE LIFE

Adding to the local experience, we promote staying on property to enjoy the various outdoor pursuits that include clay pigeon shooting, archery, fishing, boating, and horseback riding. We even offer dressing up for dinner in period costumes to embrace the 1820s way of life, and have dozens of outfits for both men and women to choose from. We are an experiential property as opposed to a commodity hotel.

## DIGITAL ROI

While social media efforts play an important role in our marketing efforts, we have found that there is still very much a place for printed materials—



likely due to the average age of the clientele we attract. At the same time, I find it very hard to quantify the exact impact or ROI of social media other than creating awareness. It is still unclear to me whether that awareness translates into something tangible. More broadly, we have enhanced our website to be very mobile friendly. Videos today are a must to invite guests on a journey and an experience, rather than reciting the facts and figures of the hotel.

### **CONCIERGE AS FILTER**

While guests nowadays are a lot more informed and can conduct their own research about how best to experience a new location, once on property, they still seek reassurance that the information they found online is indeed reliable. This is where a concierge comes into play. Their knowledge of the locality is unmatched, coupled with local contacts and relationships they have to organize personalized and exclusive excursions.

### **LUXURY, DISCONNECTED**

Our approach to technology has been that of sufficiency with the opportunity to simply switch off. We are an experiential property, and being able to disconnect is itself a luxury. Our televisions are hidden

in the rooms. There is no business center on property. Everything is done to encourage guests not to think about being connected. While necessary for some, we certainly do not promote it.

### **LITTLE DELIGHTS**

We meet all of our guests on the front steps of the property with a glass of champagne and a hot towel to refresh after their journey. We offer personalized menus in the dining room. We have water, cookies, and fruits on display all throughout the property for guests to help themselves. We also give a turndown gift every night, whether a scarf, luxury soaps, or a memento from the property as a souvenir. Every gesture and detail makes a difference.





Photos Courtesy of *The Plaza*

# George Cozonis

MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
THE PLAZA HOTEL  
(NEW YORK, UNITED STATES)

BORN IN:  
Athens, Greece

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:  
United States

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:  
34

**“ Every last person’s work is not only useful, but essential. Imagine if there weren’t any clean pillowcases, bed sheets, or dinner napkins? The hotel would come to a complete standstill. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I was born in the heart of Athens, Greece, and spent my summers by the sea. My father was an avid outdoorsman and would take our family on frequent hiking, camping, hunting, biking, and road trips. My parents had a large circle of friends from all walks of life—academics, entrepreneurs, farmers, and artists. They were from all over the world. Being exposed to their cultures, ideas, and insights was one of the strongest influences in my life growing up. In addition, we used to travel as a family all over Greece, and my father would sometimes take me on business trips. Since I was young, I was fascinated by the hotels we visited.

#### **KID GLOVES**

In between high school and college, I spent a summer “working” at the Grande Bretagne Hotel in Athens. At nearly 200 years old, it is still one of the grandest hotels in the world. I say “working” because the owners were family friends and the staff treated me with kid gloves. This amounted to everything being explained to me, without getting my hands dirty. Looking back, the exposure to such a beautiful, well-kept and historic hotel, where the traditions of old-world European hospitality were upheld and cherished, solidified my interest in the industry.

## NOT SO FAST

After studying hotel management, I truly believed I would be hired as a general manager upon graduating. It was a wakeup call when, in my first job as a management trainee, I could barely keep up answering telephones at the reception desk.

## THE LAUNDRY ROOM

I completed my management training program at Boston's Parker House, the oldest continuously operating hotel in America. I was then offered the position of laundry manager at the same property. This was a very special unit of the hotel. Not only did it have a stable and dedicated crew, but it also employed individuals with developmental disabilities. They had been there for years and were great at what they did. This taught me that there is a place for everyone in our industry and that working in a community such as a hotel can bring precious and critical value to a person's life—no matter the role.

Working on the laundry team also made me realize that it isn't the relatively few glamorous jobs that make a hotel what it is. Every person's work is not only useful, but essential. Imagine if there weren't clean pillowcases, bed sheets, or dinner napkins. The hotel would come to a complete standstill.

## A CULTURE OF SERVICE

A shared vision, common goals, and a commitment to serve are at the heart of team culture. In this industry, every colleague must have, in his or her heart, a spirit of service. In practice, this means that the entire team must consistently adhere to a set of behaviors, standards, and good habits that serve the guests, the employees, and therefore the organization.

## LUXURY EVOLVED

Not long ago, luxury in the context of hotels was mainly about feather-top mattresses, silver teapots, and champagne. Today, those are not the only things that count. Each customer has his or her own set of customer aspirations, and they have evolved over time. Therefore, the ideal relationship between guests and staff is one in which staff are trained to seek out, learn, and understand what is important for every guest. They must then have the skill and authority to deliver. I believe the only thing that can make a customer-staff relationship even more effective is when a customer actively invests time and energy into creating a positive rapport with staff. I am sure that many will regard this as a heretical statement, but I truly believe in it.



## **PRESENT OR NOT**

The fundamental goal of a leader should be that the unit, department, or hotel he or she leads should function equally well in the leader's absence as when the leader is present. In other words, a leader's job is to build a great team, empower it, trust it, and support it to deliver. A leader should not micromanage day-to-day operations.

## **POSITIVE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES**

I interview every person we hire. I don't focus on a person's skills or experience. Other managers will have already conducted thorough interviews with the applicant about experience and credentials. My interviews only last three-to-five minutes, during which I focus on how the candidate can make others feel.

Even though we are in the business of creating positive emotional experiences, most interactions between staff and guests are brief. It can take less than three minutes to check into a hotel. It takes sixty seconds to place a breakfast order and minutes to deliver it. Hotel employees don't have the luxury of a lot of time in which they can make guests feel good. They must be able to do so in the span of a few minutes or even a few seconds. If the candidate cannot make me feel good in less than five minutes, chances are that

he or she will not be able to accomplish that with a guest either.

## **FORMALITY STILL MATTERS**

There was a time when one did not need to be taught, at least in the workplace, that one does not chew gum when working, or that silverware placed in a certain way on one's plate signaled that the plate could be cleared, or that responding to "thank you" with "no problem" or "sure" just isn't done. Today, the bar for formality is much lower, but it still matters in the luxury space.

## **A MISMATCH OF INVESTMENT**

It has always struck me as odd that the hotel investment community will think nothing of spending several hundred thousand dollars on a chandelier or millions decorating a lobby—and only pennies, by comparison, on training staff. People are our one irreplaceable resource, and the need for training is more intense than ever. Some enlightened owners understand this, but overall the industry is strikingly behind in keeping up with this need. Every luxury hotel should have a training department, complete with classrooms, trainers, educational tools, and a commensurate payroll spend. I think that we have a long way to go as an industry in this respect.

## FEEL GOOD LUXURY

Luxury is not only about crystal chandeliers, champagne, and caviar. It is about making guests feel good. A guest who eats at McDonalds and is made to feel good is just as appreciative of the experience as a guest at The Plaza. A boutique hotel is just as much of a business as an ultra-luxury property. If you're looking to join the industry, it's important to find the market segment that is best suited to your personality and style.



## BE COOL, BE DETAILED

There is one common denominator that all luxury hotels share—drama, and lots of it. Temperament and ability to manage difficult situations are incredibly important to success. At the same time, so is an infinite attention to detail. This is something some people enjoy and others do not. Be honest with yourself about your skillsets.



## A VISION FOR YOUR CAREER

Do not focus on your “next job.” Instead, focus on a vision of where you would like to be eventually. Once you have this in mind, evaluate every career opportunity that comes to you by two criteria: Will you learn from it? Will it enable you to make a contribution





that your employer will value? Always progress professionally with a big-picture plan in mind.

### TREAT EVERY GUEST EQUALLY

A high net-worth customer who spends vast amounts of money in your hotel is very important. You must pay great attention to this kind of guest. Yet, never at the expense of the customer who spends a few hundred dollars for one night in the smallest room available. That customer may have been saving up in order to celebrate a wedding anniversary in a hotel as luxurious as the one where you happen to work. Disappointing them in any way is far more serious, in my view, than disappointing the guest who spends almost every night of the year in luxury hotels.

### AS A GUEST, FEEL AT HOME

Hotels always aspire to be homes away from home. In order for that to be realized, technology must be comparable to what a guest has at home. The first thing that many guests do when they check into a hotel is connect their devices to the Wi-Fi network. If cell phone reception in a hotel is weak, it can ruin a guest's stay. We have invested heavily in Wi-Fi and have also installed cell phone signal repeaters for complete coverage. We offer additional features,

such as the ability for guests to connect their devices, wirelessly, to their guestroom televisions so that they may play their own content. This is what they do at home. They must be able to do it here if they are to

feel at home. Moreover, since many people find it more efficient to stay connected via text messaging, we now offer guests the option of communicating with us in that way, too.







# Gerrit Graef

GENERAL MANAGER,  
THE RITZ-CARLTON, RIYADH  
(KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA)

BORN IN: Rheine, Germany

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Saudi Arabia, United Arab  
Emirates, Qatar, India, Maldives,  
Australia, Malaysia, Hong Kong,  
Germany, Thailand

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

33

**“We encourage the ladies and gentlemen of the hotel to engage our guests if the opportunity presents itself, and to make decisions, craft special moments, and resolve customer issues in any way or form they choose to. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

When I was young, I learned to adapt to new environments quickly. My father was in the military and we moved eight times growing up. As early as fourteen, my mother’s love for cooking persuaded me to become a chef, and I worked in the kitchen of a small, family-run hotel restaurant. At eighteen, I was certified as a professional chef. Assigned to the Navy for military service, I was able to circumnavigate the world twice, experiencing locales in the United States, South America, Northern Europe, and both North and West Africa. I learned to appreciate other cultures, exercise discipline and focus, and develop basic leadership skills. I have no doubt that these experiences played an important role in my pursuit of a career in the hospitality business.

#### **FIRST TIME LEADER**

My first leadership role was as a restaurant manager in a small Relais and Chateaux hotel in Germany. Being a leader for the first time presents many challenges, as well as a chance to learn, grow, and develop. You need to create a shared vision and set of goals, understand what motivates each of your colleagues, value their contributions, and inspire them to be better. At this early stage of leadership, I learned to treat every moment as a professional learning experience.

#### **WORK BACKWARDS**

Many companies create a strategy first, and then try to get their team to rally around it. Good-to-great





companies require leaders first to know what their organizations and people are passionate about, what drives their economic engine, and what they can be best at in the world. With that insight and vision, you can craft an inclusive strategy that speaks to everyone, and one that lays down a long-term path to success.

### HUMAN CAPITAL

Great leaders should embody a paradoxical mix of personal humility and professional will. On one hand, the humility to realize you cannot succeed alone. And on the other, the professional will to pursue perfection given the resources you have. Most importantly, your most valuable resource is your team. You can have the most luxurious and glamorous hotel in the world, but if your team doesn't embody and exude a genuine sense and spirit of service, you will not be successful.

### A SECOND HOME

In a place like Riyadh, where plenty of colleagues are expats, they consider the workplace their second home. Therefore, it is very important that you engage them both personally and professionally, and that you allow openness and honesty to guide your relationship. Ask them what you can do from a management perspective to create a better working

environment—and act on it. This will empower your team to do more and to be better.

## SELLING AN EXPERIENCE

We create memorable experiences for our guests to make them feel like they are staying at their home away from home. We aren't selling hotel rooms. We are selling an experience. If The Ritz-Carlton was merely a hotel, our guests would find the same product for less elsewhere. The experience, however, is something far beyond the quality of the sheets, food, spa and pool. It's the personalized attention, service, and genuine care that makes all the difference.

## EMPOWER YOUR TEAM

In order to be successful in this business, you need to unleash the potential of your team by empowering them and giving them the space to deliver. For example, we encourage the ladies and gentlemen of the hotel to engage our guests if the opportunity presents itself, and to make decisions, craft special moments, and resolve customer issues in any way or form they chose. This is as much a service decision as it is a business decision. Empowering staff to make business decisions will increase their ownership in the success of the hotel.





## **GENERATION Y**

We conduct regular meetings with leadership—managers, directors, and above—to discuss important strategic and business decisions that affect everyone. All are encouraged to share their thoughts and insights. We have many millennials in leadership positions and they are the most vocal about wanting to contribute creatively to the success of the hotel. They are also the most hungry for training and development. My role is to provide them with ample opportunities to develop their skillsets, as this will build loyalty and trust between them and the company. If they start feeling like they are in an environment that's not conducive to personal and professional growth, they will leave.

## **LEADING FROM BEHIND**

I see myself more as a coach than a chief executive. We need strong players to serve as midfielders, strikers, and defenders. Each team member has a very specific role, and it's my job to coach them, guide them, empower them, steer them, and support them so that we win as a team.

## **THE SECRET TO HIRING**

The first question I ask an applicant is what they expect from leadership. This question allows me to identify people who are simply satisfied with landing a job and will only do what is required of them versus people who possess a genuine passion for the industry and are eager to contribute to the success of the business. A deep passion for hospitality and service is essential. The second question I ask is what their dream job would be. This helps me understand the vision they have for their own career, along with other deep-seated passions and interests. Knowing this can help me carve out a career path for their success as they progress in the role for which they are applying for.

At The Ritz-Carlton we have a standardized way of hiring talent, which exposes the applicant to a set of behavioral and situational scenarios, and allows them to think deeply as to how they resolve various issues.

## **PURPOSE CREATES PASSION**

Starting a new job is a significant emotional event. Generally, it is the best time to make a behavioral change and form new habits. New employees are excited to join a company and want to be successful. Employees cannot truly be a part of an organization

unless they know and internalize both the expectations and values of the organization. We want all employees to feel as though they are a part of The Ritz-Carlton Company, and not simply working for it. This creates purpose for every new employee, and purpose creates passion. When an employee is passionate about the work, they will stay longer and maximize their talent to benefit the company.

### **ADAPTING TO CHANGE**

Guests today are world travelers, seeing and experiencing a range of products and offerings year-round. An extraordinary service today can be a basic service tomorrow. To address this challenge, we not only record guest preferences in very sophisticated ways across the company, but we also regularly host roundtables with customers. A deep dive into a guest's experience at our property and others around the world can serve as a form of market intelligence, and can play an important role in how we continue to differentiate ourselves and deliver the very best we can for our guests.

### **BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS**

Any kind of complaint must always be treated as an opportunity for us to adapt, to learn from our mis-

takes, and to deliver even better service in the future. Negative feedback is the breakfast of champions. We learn and grow from these moments, and it's our responsibility to turn every crisis into an opportunity to do better.

### **AN AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE**

As one of the city's most significant tourist attractions, The Ritz-Carlton Riyadh is designed to provide a truly authentic experience of Arabic hospitality. The moment you arrive, we greet you with a cup of carefully selected, pounded, and roasted Arabic coffee. It is prepared with the finest cardamom and saffron, and is complimented with fresh, seasonal dates. The scents of "Bokhoor," or Arabic incense, permeate the hotel, and as an extra personal touch, you can find an Arabic calligraphy artist in the lobby who can create beautiful notes or letters for you. We attach these writings to local sweets and desserts, which can be gifted to a loved one.

### **ONLINE TARGETING**

We recently piloted a mobile-only, location-specific campaign to promote the hotel's offerings during Ramadan. Only users browsing on their phone and staying in the vicinity of the hotel would see a special





offer during this period. Additionally, we collaborate with influential people in the Kingdom and the region to promote the property on social media to their fans and followers. As a brand, we are focused on developing our social media assets and online engagement channels to incorporate more guest-generated content for those who wish to share their Ritz-Carlton experiences online. To experiment even further, we launched the Foursquare World Concierge program to provide expertly curated destination tips for many global cities.

### **LOCAL DESIGN, GLOBAL FOOTPRINT**

To enhance our brand, and to remain both relevant and competitive in an increasingly global marketplace, we have completely evolved the design approach to our hotels from an almost cookie-cutter tactic to a consistently inconsistent model where no two hotels are the same. Since 2004, all Ritz-Carlton hotels are an example of this new philosophy in action. Local culture and modern aesthetics are now woven together to design hotels that are casually elegant, with the occasional classical influence as appropriate.



# Graham Ledger

MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
SINGITA SERENGETI  
(SOUTH AFRICA AND ZIMBABWE)

BORN IN:

Eastbourne, United Kingdom

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

United Kingdom, South Africa,  
Tanzania, Botswana, Rwanda

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

43



**“In the coming years, I predict guests will expect their destinations to act responsibly, ethically, and sustainably, without sacrificing luxury. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up in a tightknit family in Eastbourne, UK. As a kid, I enjoyed fishing, playing cricket, riding bikes, and exploring huge open farmlands. My father worked for a company that ran a chain of cinemas throughout Southern England, and my mother, after she raised my siblings and I, became a housekeeper for the De Vere Hotel Group at the Grand Hotel in Eastbourne. My first experience in the hospitality industry was serving desserts off the trolley at lunchtime on Sunday at a restaurant called Crimples. This provided some extra pocket money, and I discovered that I really enjoyed the interaction with guests and the feeling of such a dynamic environment. No two hours were the same. This variety was a real motivating factor for me to pursue hospitality.

#### **MAKING HISTORY**

I rapidly progressed to various leadership positions at a very young age, working for a variety of hotels in the UK. My first leadership position was serving as one of two assistant managers of the Apollo Hotel in Birmingham, UK. My primary responsibility was to handle the function room on weekends for weddings. This role taught me the vital importance of planning the logistics for an event, because if those back-of-house tasks are not efficiently managed, the front-of-house cannot function. I also learned the importance of seemingly disparate roles, all of which are essential for success. Soon after, at the age of twenty, I became the youngest ever appointed deputy manager of the De Vere Hotel Group's De Montfort Hotel in Kenilworth Midlands, UK.





### A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

A truly successful working environment needs a variety of elements and attitudes: pursuit of excellence while being humble; being proactive without being aggressive; being consultative without being condescending; and being decisive without being arrogant. Overlaying this formula onto a properly rewarded workforce, with deliverables that are measurable at all levels, is the recipe for success.

### A WELL-EDUCATED TEAM

In the luxury hospitality sector, and in particular the game lodge and wilderness segment, it is vital that our staff have a deep knowledge of the area and its offerings. Guests are very likely to be immersed into a very foreign environment and need to be reassured that they are in good hands, and that they are being professionally cared for at every level.

### BEST LAID PLANS

When articulating a broader strategy or specific guidance, be clear and articulate in your communications. It may make sense in your own head, but a lack of specificity can lead to misinterpretation. When policies and practices are open to interpretation or imagination, the best laid plans can run amok.

## DIVERSE INTERACTIONS

In remote locations, particularly where we operate, employees must be able to mix and gel with any and all cultures that exist on our payroll. At any one time we can have up to a dozen different cultures and nationalities on staff. If even one person rubs another the wrong way, it can be very disruptive and have obvious negative consequences. Hire for acceptance and embrace of diversity, and a high level of cultural sensitivity and appreciation.

## THE 80/20 RULE

After interviews, including a careful background and reference check of a potential employee, evaluate their candidacy using the 80/20 rule. The 80 refers to enthusiasm and cultural fit, while the 20 refers to the technical side, which can be taught and developed over time. The 80 portion is the key factor in building a powerful team that works well together and commits to excellence, particularly in times of stress.

## A PREMIUM ON VALUES AND RELATIONSHIPS

When interviewing candidates, I ask them about family values, their school years, achievements, and friendships. I ask whether they're still in touch with old friends, as I believe this shows a commitment to

valuing relationships. Depending on the position, I will also ask a candidate to complete a "suitability" questionnaire—a third-party psychological and analytical test to gauge whether the candidate would be compatible with us and our values.

## AN INVALUABLE MENTOR

In South Africa, I partnered with a successful businessman and seasoned entrepreneur ten years my senior to launch a hotel of our own. A chartered accountant by training, he taught me a great deal about life, tolerance, family, and success. We grew our hotel business into a group of eight properties over fourteen years, eventually selling the company to an investment firm that was listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange. This is something I could have never have achieved without his guidance, vision, and expertise.

## ORIENTATION

When a new employee joins the team, a deep orientation is paramount. A poorly-inducted staff member will fail spectacularly, and it is completely unfair to them to not be properly immersed in the company, its practices, and its values. This process of introduction ranges from three days to more than three weeks. We also have new staff tutored in local sensitivities and



traditions. A small committee of senior local staff and executives has developed a simple but effective “how to integrate well” guide, which is vital to maintaining a level of respect within local communities.

### THE ROBOT SYNDROME

We need to constantly refresh our training, expectations, and ways we motivate staff; otherwise, an

assembly line mentality will prevail, resulting in a fatal blow. Each and every guest must feel like an individual, rather than being processed on an assembly line. This challenge can be overcome with the right guidance and education. Given that the talent pool in remote locations is relatively shallow, we developed a very robust in-house training program, which includes rigorous identification of potential employees from all sectors of economic life in and around





our communities. We seek enthusiasm, the ability to speak rudimentary English, and an effort to present a professional appearance. The rest we can shape by absorbing these candidates into our way of doing things and by infusing them with our company DNA so that they can grow organically.

### **BE PREPARED TO SACRIFICE**

If you're interested in joining the luxury hospitality business, be absolutely certain that this is the career for you. There are some significant sacrifices to make throughout your journey. It is more of a lifestyle than a career. The unrelenting commitment involves being on and available 24/7. Importantly, when all others around you are celebrating, you are the one working to ensure that celebration is a success, and that can be hard to handle in the beginning. For example, working during Christmas and being away from loved ones.

### **A PERSONAL TOUCH**

Taking special note of a guest's preferences before and during their stay is one of the hallmarks of this industry. If a guest regularly orders a gin and tonic, we will add this cocktail to their drink box for their guide to share with them during a game drive, or we



may prepare a surprise gin bar during sundown in a beautiful setting. We also surprise guests by arriving to an expected location for breakfast, lunch, or dinner, as we often setup such experiences in breath-taking areas. Knowing this is a guest's first time at our property or that they're celebrating something special also allows us the opportunity to respond creatively.

### THE EVOLVING TRAVELER

Guests today see travel as a way to bring more balance to their lives. They view a vacation as a way to



reflect and make better life choices. They are not simply looking to sustain their own health but also looking to immerse themselves in new cultures and create meaningful memories, including leaving the location a little better than they found it. Nature also has a powerful impact on our stress levels. The more we separate ourselves from it, the more anxious and stressed we become. With space becoming a luxury in big, cosmopolitan cities, it is no wonder that Sub Saharan Africa has had the fastest growth in wellness tourism since 2007. Guests are coming to Africa in search of wellness and to reconnect with nature.

### A VISIBLE TREND

Sustainability is emerging as one of the most important trends in our industry. After the financial crisis of 2008, we saw a change in the mindset of our guests, who started to exhibit a greater desire for personal connections and enriching experiences with a lighter footprint. Now there's evidence, too, to support this observation. Guests are increasingly likely to choose a destination based on its social or environmental impact, and they prefer companies that embed eco-friendly practices into their operations. Just as

guests expect free Wi-Fi, they now also expect hotels and other tourism businesses to behave in a socially responsible way.

In the coming years, I predict guests will expect their destinations to act responsibly, ethically, and sustainably, without sacrificing luxury. But the definition of luxury will continue to evolve; it will become more about the experience than the accommodation. The new luxury will be clean air, open spaces, and simplicity in design.

### THE FUTURE OF FOOD

Good food has not only become a luxury. It has become a necessity. With health, nutrition, and the environmental footprint you leave behind at the top of many travelers' list, documenting food preferences and accommodating these needs is very important. Eating natural and being conscious of what you put into your body is a fast-growing and important trend to follow, as is promoting sustainable diets and food practices in your establishment. Culinary experiences can now determine whether or not a trip was successful, so making sure your establishment's food is up to scratch with international trends is non-negotiable.







# James Low

GENERAL MANAGER,  
COMO UMA PARO (BHUTAN)  
COMO UMA PUNAKHA (BHUTAN)

BORN IN:

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Bhutan, Thailand, Malaysia,  
Singapore, United Kingdom

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

39

**“One of the most important elements of leading a luxury property is to surround yourself with the most talented people you can find. They must be competent, intelligent, resourceful, and willing to go the extra mile to achieve greatness. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up in small towns across Malaysia as a care-free child immersed in the outdoors. My father was heading the traffic section of the Malaysian Police Force and also served in the British Forces for a period of time. He would counsel young traffic offenders on the dangers of bad driving instead of just levying hefty fines. Whenever he was caught in a traffic jam, he would get out of his car and redirect traffic. He always led by example and worked with immense passion. My mother used to work with the Malaysian Rubber Board. At the time, Malaysia was colonized by the British, and I was always fascinated by the British expatriate lifestyle.

#### **AT FIRST SIGHT**

On a school fieldtrip to inspect a premier hotel in Kuala Lumpur, for those curious about a career in hospitality, I was extremely impressed with what I saw—posh lobby décor, glamorous restaurants, and a beautiful ballroom with eclectic curtains. I quietly told myself that this was the environment I wanted to be in, pushing aside the original intention of working in a bank.

#### **BAPTISM BY FIRE**

My first position in the industry was with the events team at the Regent Hotel Kuala Lumpur. At the time,



it was an institution that catered to captains of industry, heads of government, and royalty. In this role, I interacted with and was exposed to chefs, banquet managers, food and beverage managers, artisans, and event promoters. I learned the ins and outs of event planning and protocol. It was baptism by fire into the expectations and lifestyles of the rich and famous.

### A WINDOW INTO BRANDING

My first leadership role was as a sales and marketing manager for Faber Merlin, a reputable Malaysian group of hotels. I was exposed to all-things sales, marketing, communications, and public relations. I was also involved in six new hotel openings and in feasibility studies of new hotel project opportunities. This position provided me a deep understanding on the power of brand, and how brand values determine your target audience and market segments. In other words, this role taught me why guests loyal to Aman will always prefer them, why guests loyal to Mandarin Oriental will always prefer them, and how COMO Hotels & Resorts distinguishes itself, too, with a loyal following.

### PASSION AND PRIDE

Recognizing colleagues for a job well done is paramount to ensuring continued success. Whether pro-

viding certificates of achievement, celebrating employees of the month or year, or pinning guest letters of appreciation to the staff notice board, recognition is the fuel of job motivation. It builds confidence and maintains both passion and pride.

### 20/20 VISION

Without a vision for the organization, one cannot focus on achievement because there is no north star. It is the blind leading the blind. A vision must be articulated with clarity, passion, and confidence. In addition, you must build in milestones to track and celebrate all achievements—meeting financial targets, excellent TripAdvisor comments, and positive guest surveys, to name a few. During employee orientation, I talk about the vision of the company, shared goals, my personal career journey, and how I set my own milestones for success. I also talk about the lessons I've learned throughout my career. Hopefully, employees can relate to this journey and be encouraged with theirs.

### A LESSON IN LEADERSHIP

In the world of five-star chain hotels, an employee hardly ever gets to meet a regional vice president, let alone the president. I had the opportunity to meet



Bern Chorenge, the former president of Hyatt International, during one of his rare hotel visits. He opted to sit next to me at a hosted dinner instead of beside the area vice president and my general manager. He called me by name and said, "I'd rather sit next to you because I would like to hear what Hyatt means to you, and how you could add value to our hotel." Empowering me to voice my opinion was a moment I'll never forget. He truly made me feel valued both personally and professionally.

### THE BUDDY SYSTEM

When a new employee joins the organization, they are paired in a buddy system for quick and efficient on-the-job training. For example, a new waiter will be attached to an experienced waiter who teaches and coaches the newcomer about their role and responsibilities from scratch. This way the new recruit gets trained immediately and the teacher gets the recognition of their experience and knowledge. During orientation, new employees are reminded

and encouraged to be humble, sincere, and respectful so that their assigned expert is motivated to teach them.

### **SWOT YOUR TEAM**

I task my department heads to do a SWOT analysis on every member of their team, and to draw up training programs for them. I believe it is our duty as managers to nurture our staff by developing their strengths and turning their weaknesses into skills so they can shine as brand ambassadors.

### **A SMALL TALENT POOL**

Reflecting on the labor challenges in Bhutan, the industry is rather small, and consequently there is a very small pool of well-trained and experienced employees who are exposed to luxury clientele. Promotional opportunities are also limited within the company and resort because the properties are relatively small, and thus staff tends to look for new opportunities when new hotels open. When you have trained your employees to a very high standard to cater to luxury customers, their experience goes beyond technical knowledge. They feel confident, poised, and connected with this client set. New staff tends to get nervous and timid when confronting





discerning guests who are not so forgiving when our brand delivery is compromised.

### A WORLD-CLASS TEAM

One of the most important elements of leading a luxury property is to surround yourself with the most talented people you can find. They must be competent, intelligent, resourceful, and willing to go the extra mile to achieve greatness. At first, I will try my best to promote from within. If not, I will source from the local talent pool. Failing that, I will look for talent from within our COMO Group, and lastly from international sources.



### EMBRACE THE LOCALITY

You must embody the richness of the culture and tradition at the property in order to distinguish the travel experience: local musicians and spiced tea to welcome guests; cultural dances over dinner; a personal invitation to a Bhutanese whiskey tasting; special turndown gifts including hand-painted shoe horns or stone paper weights; blessed prayer flags for hanging; special monk blessings; the lighting of butter lamps or a bag of dried Bhutanese chillies and a recipe to take home upon departure. These ideas all are unique to the location and provide a truly authentic local experience.

## A SKY-HIGH OPPORTUNITY

I was once reading that destinations offered helicopter tours in various parts of Africa, Nepal, Myanmar, and beyond. An opportunity then presented itself when the Bhutanese government announced it was launching a helicopter service for emergency airlifts for remote places, and offered this service for charter when the two aircrafts were not in use. We were the first resorts to design this service in Bhutan, offering a six-night package that includes discovering the heart of the Himalayan Kingdom by air. The excursion features one helicopter trip to the Laya Valley and another to the hidden vistas of Punakha, Paro, and Thimphu valleys.



## THE BEAUTY OF SIMPLICITY

Bhutan is a unique destination in the sense that guests come to experience the country because of its simplicity, spirituality, and pristine environment. They are here to disconnect, focus on their wellbeing, and reconnect with nature, and perhaps their spirituality. Of course, we have very good Wi-Fi in case, which guests appreciate, but the knowledge of it being available if needed is enough not to worry.



## SAME PREFERENCE, DIFFERENT PLACE

We have two resorts in Bhutan and more often than not, our guests will choose to stay at both properties. When the guests arrive in our second property, our employees will already be able to anticipate their needs: still or sparkling water; their wine or liquor preference; whether they like the windows open or closed; whether they have any dietary restrictions, and so on. Documenting preferences as best you can and as regularly as you can, coupled with a system that allows information to be shared seamlessly, is critical to success in luxury hospitality.

## SUSTAINABILITY IS HERE TO STAY

Environmentally friendly policies and practices are gaining traction in our industry, and it is an important trend that's here to stay. Small and large companies can embrace this notion in different ways. For us, we plant trees twice a year, cut down on our electricity usage by using energy-efficient light bulbs, sort all of our garbage for recycling, and have reduced our use of plastic bottles to glass bottles that we simply refill. Additionally, in our hotel shops, we sell handicrafts including hand-woven textiles, scarfs, and bags to support the Youth Development Foundation and RENEW, a women's foundation. We have always believed that we have to be socially responsible and

connected to communities where we operate our resorts.

The industry can also lend its support to ethical causes, such as not serving shark fin and procuring supplies and products from ethical companies. Tourism, if not regulated, often destroys communities and the surrounding environment, while socially responsible practices promote sustainability of the industry in the long run.

## QUALITY CONTROL

Freshly prepared food is a hallmark of the luxury travel experience. We offer four main cuisines at our properties in Bhutan—Bhutanese, Indian, Western, and our spa-inspired healthy menu, COMO Cuisine. All of our seafood, beef, and lamb are flown in weekly from Bangkok, sourced through our sister property, COMO Metropolitan Bangkok. This ensures freshness, quality, and variety.





Kai  
Speth

VICE PRESIDENT,  
OPERATIONS & BUSINESS  
PERFORMANCE (WMC GROUP)

GENERAL MANAGER  
THE REVERIE SAIGON (VIETNAM)

BORN IN:  
Bad Kreuznach, Germany

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:  
Vietnam, Taiwan, South Korea,  
Indonesia, Hong Kong, United  
States, United Kingdom, France,  
Germany

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 36

*Photos Courtesy of The Reverie Saigon*

**“One of the most important ways to engage and empower your colleagues is to let them problem-solve. Often times you will be expected to resolve an issue that was voiced by your team, but the real solution is to push back the challenge: how would you solve it? ”**

#### GROWING UP

I grew up in the hospitality business. My family ran their own traditional German coffeehouse and then some years later opened up a hotel. From an early age, I would help my parents by working behind the service bar. I loved the energy of a busy hotel, and the fact that guests were coming from all over. My father wanted me to take over the business when I was older, but I had other plans.

I was influenced by reading hotel magazines that profiled famous German hoteliers around the world, and it made me want to follow their path. George Schwab at The Pierre in New York City, or Kurt Wachtveitl

of the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok, were people I looked up to and wanted to emulate. I was only ten when I knew that I wanted to be a hotelier of a famous hotel. I wanted to see the world and experience the glamour of a big city.

#### A TOUGH INDUSTRY

My first job was as a chef apprentice at the Steigenberger Hotel in Bad Kreuznach, Germany. I then went on to complete my military service before rejoining the industry as a *Commis de Cuisine* at the Landhaus Scherrer, a one-star Michelin restaurant in Hamburg. I learned very quickly that I didn't want to

remain a chef forever, and that running a restaurant is very demanding. At the same time, back then, the treatment of young chefs in the kitchen was brutal—screaming, cursing, and beating were the norm. The pressure was through the roof, especially in a gourmet restaurant. I took a job at Palio, a now-closed Italian restaurant in New York City, and was again beaten and kicked around. I knew then that I wanted to manage people and change the industry. We needed to treat people as human beings.

## MANAGING FOR SUCCESS

In the spring of 1990, I became restaurant manager at the Polo Restaurant at the Westbury New York in the heart of Manhattan. I realized then that simply having a good knowledge of product and being eager, driven, and ambitious will not alone make you successful. You need to understand how to manage people. You need to understand how to interact with people of different abilities and motivations. And you need to understand how to persuade and inspire people to act in a certain way. If you understand people, you understand leadership.

## PROBLEM + SOLUTION

One of the most important ways to engage and empower your colleagues is to let them problem-solve.

Often times you will be expected to resolve an issue that was voiced by your team, but the real solution is to push back the challenge: How would you solve it? Empower your team to not only identify challenges, but to also propose solutions. When an issue is resolved in this way—instead of from top down—there is a much higher chance of success. I also make it clear that I cannot be everywhere at all times, and that as a team we need to communicate and collaborate, resolving issues as they arise. It could be related to menu changes in the dining room, housekeeping procedures, or how the finance department could be more efficient. In many cases, those closest to the problem will also propose the most appropriate solution.

## PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

Throughout my career, I was always ambitious and sought the advice of my father and former general managers I worked under. Never be afraid to ask for guidance. They told me not to make hasty decisions and to patiently wait for the right role to present itself. You have to think of your career as one of longevity, so be patient until you can really identify with an opportunity to learn and grow both personally and professionally.





## DEALING WITH OWNERS

One of the challenges I've seen over the years is the sometimes tense relationship between hotel owners and staff. I have seen numerous instances where large companies are all too eager to sacrifice members on the leadership team of a property in order to maintain a good relationship with owners.

In one such instance, an excellent manager of mine had met with the owner of a hotel in Asia. The daughter of the owner pulled me aside because she felt my manager did not bow deep enough out of respect. She told me to fire my colleague. After refusing, my

superiors ultimately stepped in and transferred this manager overseas to another property. There have been similar instances with sales directors, finance directors, and executive chefs. For some time since, I decided not to work for large hotel management companies that blindly follow the orders of their owners.

## INVEST IN THE FUTURE

Today, the finance director seems to have more authority, and this stymies innovation. A true luxury offering cannot be achieved if cost cutting is the norm.

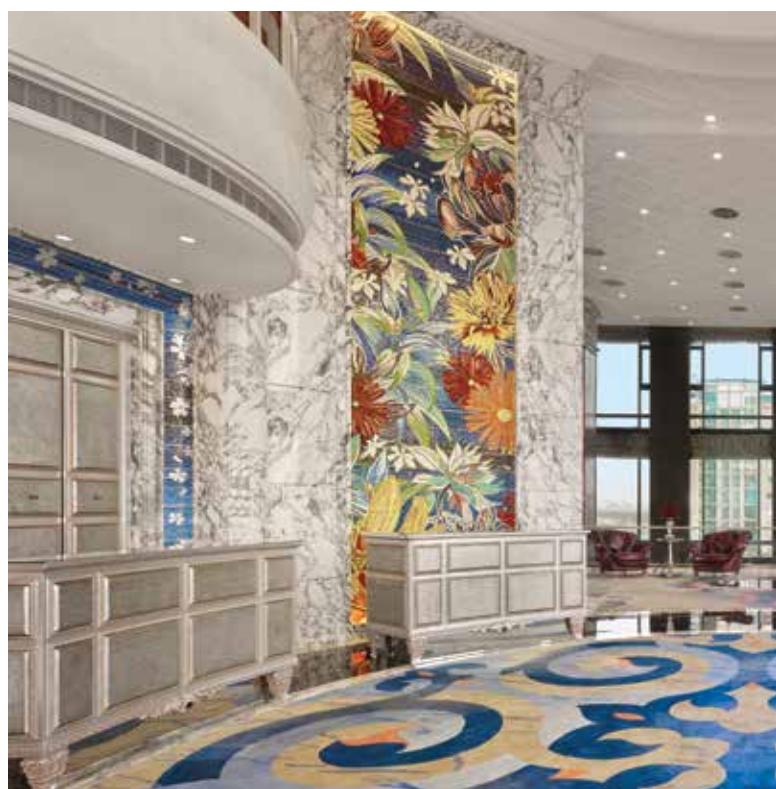
Success can only come from investing in people, new product offerings, and new service ideas. A shrinking budget cannot always be used as an excuse not to improve or innovate. Push to experiment. It is the only way to remain relevant in a very competitive industry.

### THE MEANING OF LUXURY

Luxury means different things to different people. Some will associate it with white-glove service, others with Egyptian cotton, others still with sleeping in a tent in the jungle. To each their own. The important thing is to understand that people have different expectations, needs, and motivations, and it is your job as a hotelier to understand those differences, and to both cater and personalize your service accordingly.

### AN INTERESTING STORY

When I served as general manager of the Sofitel Legend Metropole Hanoi in Vietnam, the tremendous history of the hotel lent itself to an incredible story. During the renovation of the Bamboo Bar in 2011, the hotel engineering department rediscovered an underground bomb shelter that protected people from air raids during the Vietnam War. This was an accident-on-purpose. Knowing we had to renovate





the bar, I instructed our engineers to dig a little deeper. We were looking for this site, and it took us two years to find it.

The area re-opened just a few years ago, serving as a memorial. We hired local tour guides, trained them in the history of the property and the bunker, and offered this tour exclusively to guests of the hotel. Indeed, the underground history of the hotel has made the property a destination unto itself. While this was a serendipitous discovery, history and heritage can tell a unique story of your property and its location. It may even change the reason people visit.

## BE THE FIRST

At the Reverie Saigon, we recently received the appropriate local permits to land helicopters for commercial purposes on our rooftop—a unique offering in all of Southeast Asia, given that we are a city center high-rise. Once secured and promoted, we began to receive arrival bookings by helicopter, everyone from business executives to honeymooners. This is a very competitive industry, and in order to remain relevant, interesting, and capable of providing the very best to your clientele, you need to go the extra mile.

## DOING A LOT WITH A LITTLE

Once we had a guest who indicated that they had walking challenges. With this information we did our best to anticipate their needs. We assigned a room on the ground floor, we had a wheelchair and walking cane ready, a special nightlight by their bedside and bathroom, and a handlebar by their bed to make it easier for them to get in and out. One of the challenges we have as an industry is to translate guest preferences and special requests into a range of anticipatory offerings. Go above and beyond what is expected. That is how you succeed in this industry.

## MEANS TO AN END

Nowadays, the most advanced technology and programmatic setup can be found in many five-star hotels around the world. In other words, technology will not be a true differentiator moving forward. It can, however, enable a higher level of efficiency if implemented with precision. For example, in our rooms we have a special control unit with two buttons—DND and Make Up Room. The latter instantly messages housekeeping staff to attend to the room. It doesn't get any more precise.



# Krister Svensson

**GENERAL MANAGER,  
ST. REGIS HOTEL AND RESIDENCES  
(BANGKOK, THAILAND)**

*Recently appointed General Manager of  
Sentosa Cove In Singapore*

BORN IN: Stockholm, Sweden

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Thailand, Hong Kong, Philippines,  
Guam, Lebanon, United Arab  
Emirates, Australia, Indonesia,  
China, Malaysia, Sweden

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 35

*Photos Courtesy of St. Regis Hotel Bangkok*



**“If it’s your first time staying at our hotel, we will try to find you online and document anything of interest in your profile so we can begin to anticipate your requests and potentially harness what we’ve learned to surprise and delight you. ”**

#### GROWING UP

I grew up in a small town just outside of Stockholm, Sweden. When I was nine, my family moved to Thailand, as my father had accepted a leadership role for Scandinavian Airlines based in Bangkok. My brothers and I went to the International School of Bangkok for several years, so I grew up with a lot of different cultures and backgrounds, appreciating and respecting difference. And because my father worked for SAS, we were able to travel the world at a young age. I was enamored with the lifestyle. My mother, too, made a lasting impression on me with her love for cooking, and it’s the reason I entered the hospitality industry through the food and beverage side.

#### LEARNING THE ROPES

My first job in hospitality was as a steward in a restaurant in Stockholm. Essentially, I worked to maintain a high level of cleanliness in the dining area and in the kitchen. I learned early on that starting from the bottom was incredibly important to understanding roles you would otherwise be oblivious to later on. I learned to appreciate that every job was important and valued, no matter how small it may seem.

#### EMBRACING DIFFERENCE

I joined the Hyatt Regency in Dubai in 1989 as a sales executive, long before the glitz and glamor of today, and later on landed my first leadership posi-



tion as restaurant manager for Hugos, a fine-dining establishment at the same property. I was in charge of twenty staff that hailed from all over the world. Because of my upbringing around different cultures, religions and nationalities, I was able to quickly adapt to and unify the team towards a common understanding of our shared vision and goals. Regardless of our differences, we were human, and we needed to treat each other with respect, dignity, and humility.

### NOT A ONE-MAN SHOW

Leading a five-star hotel, or any hotel, is never a one-man show. You need to build a team you can trust, and based on that trust, you can delegate and empower. While it's important to celebrate the achievements of individuals along the way, it is equally important to celebrate the achievements of the team as a whole. Recognition and empowerment are motivators for success, and the more responsibility and authority a colleague feels about his or her role, the more invested they will become in the success of their duties.

### AN EARLY MENTOR

While we lived at the Hyatt in Bangkok, Brian Deeson, the general manager at the time, became a close friend of my father. When I was young, he gave me the opportunity to learn more about the industry.



Thirty-five years later, I climbed the ladder to become general manager of a luxury hotel. In no small part was I inspired and motivated by Brian. He exposed me to the inner-workings of a property, and taught me that leadership is about respecting and appreciating each and every colleague every day.

### DIFFERENT ROUTES, SAME PATH

When hiring, I look for a degree in hospitality, but by no means is this the only path to managerial respon-

sibilities. I am a firm believer in working your way up in the industry, whether starting at the front-of-the-house or the-back-of-the-house, in the kitchen or in the dining room. Not every luxury hotelier has an academic background, and not everyone needs one. In fact, I would advocate for recent graduates to still begin at the bottom of the industry to gain an appreciation for core business operations. Do not expect nor seek a managerial role right out of college. Your rank-and-file staff will know more than you, and you are bound to fail.

### **HAPPY STAFF, HAPPY GUESTS**

As a general manager, you need to walk the talk. You need to be visible and approachable, appreciating both visible and invisible roles. The power of recognition and appreciation cannot be overstated. For instance, I hold a breakfast with overnight staff so that we openly and graciously acknowledge their contribution to taking care of the hotel while the rest of us are sleeping. Additionally, I organize an afternoon tea every month with a select group of fifteen to twenty colleagues so they can inform me in a casual setting what's working, what's not working, and where we can improve.

### **FINDING TALENT**

One of the biggest challenges we face as an industry is hiring millennials and managing their expectations. New, younger hires are not satisfied with entry-level jobs. They do not pay very well, schedules are odd hours and can include both evenings and weekends, and basic tasks become routine and uninteresting. This makes the challenge of hiring that much more difficult, and that much more important, because you need to build a service-oriented team that loves people, loves the industry, and loves to go above and beyond to ensure a pleasant guest experience. This is no easy task. As a luxury hotel industry, we need to be more competitive in our compensation in order to secure and retain top talent with leadership potential across every level of the organization.

### **EVERY IMPRESSION COUNTS**

The welcome experience must be perfect. It's true what they say; you never get a second chance to make a first impression. At the same time, the farewell is just as important, for it is the last memory guests will have about their experience at your property. Of course, every impression during their stay is important, too, but it's equally imperative to pay special attention to both the welcome and farewell as moments they will never forget.





## MEASURING SUCCESS

Every team member must have a specific set of goals they're aiming towards, as well as other KPIs in place to evaluate their performance over the long-term. These indicators of success and effectiveness must be communicated clearly. They must also be revisited every month to ensure efforts are aligned, progress is rewarded, and challenges are resolved.

## A FAMILY AFFAIR

One of the most successful marketing campaigns we devised was an effort tied to family traditions. The campaign focused on our fifty-one suites, for which we offered a range of activities for the whole family to enjoy, as well as babysitting services so that parents can also enjoy time alone. It was very well received and brought in new clientele. Families that didn't



necessarily think of our property as family-friendly were suddenly interested in the experience.

### A REAL-TIME FUTURE

Virtually everyone either searches for or double-checks a hotel or restaurant online before visiting. Today's traveler is only interested in real-time information—the latest reviews, photos, and insights. In that context, we have to be fully present on key

social channels, telling our story, targeting audiences, reacting to customer feedback, and representing ourselves in a way that reflects the stature and image of our brand. To that end, we've implemented an e-butler system for guests to communicate with us via WhatsApp because we found that they are much more comfortable texting than calling. This system has proven to be incredibly effective.

## BUILDING A GUEST PROFILE

Under Marriott International, we track the likes, dislikes, and preferences of guests across the entire portfolio of 6,000 hotels around the world. In advance of your stay, we send a pre-arrival email to capture key information on how best we can serve you on your upcoming trip, and then during your stay we take every opportunity we can to learn a little more about you. If it's your first time staying at our hotel, we will try to find you online and document anything of interest in your profile so we can begin to anticipate your requests and potentially harness what we've learned to surprise and delight you.

## OLD VS. NEW

The majority of our travelers are well-heeled millennials, and they prefer communicating via text, exploring the city, and booking unique experiences. On the other hand, older guests are more traditional. They prefer to communicate face-to-face, and they also prefer to spend more time at the hotel. Understanding the needs and interests of different guest segments, particularly in the luxury market, is critical if you wish to deliver a truly personalized, anticipatory experience.







# Luc Delafosse

MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
WALDORF ASTORIA BEVERLY HILLS  
(UNITED STATES)

BORN IN:  
Levallois Perret, France

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:  
United States, France, United  
Kingdom, United Arab Emirates,  
Monaco

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:  
30

**“One of the most basic but incredibly important principles of leadership is to listen, and listen often. If you don’t listen, you don’t learn, and if you don’t learn, you cannot evolve as a leader. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up in the suburbs of Paris and in the countryside where my parents had a summer home. I must say that our life was quite simple, but over the years I did dream of one thing—discovering the world. When I was fifteen, I spent the summer working for a restaurant, which was my first taste of the business. While studying hotel management, I served as a chef at the one-star Michelin restaurant Auberge de la Poutre, run by Chef-Owner Denis Moureau.

I learned a great deal under his mentorship, but not long after, I realized that I really wanted to be on the service side of hospitality, and not in the kitchen. While serving as a bartender at the Savoy Hotel in London, I would witness Willy Bauer, the general manager at the time, walking the floor and interact-

ing with both guests and employees. I realized that's what I wanted to do.

#### **WHEN OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS**

While leading the stewarding department at the Savoy Hotel in London, I went on vacation to Monaco and struck up a conversation with the general manager of the Hotel De Paris. An opportunity was presented—join their hotel as chief steward, and when a managerial position in food and beverage opened up, I would be strongly considered. I took the job, and only after a few months I was promoted to executive assistant manager of food and beverage. I realized that hard work pays off, but you must also capitalize on once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.



## A TURNING POINT

Two years after serving as executive assistant manager of food and beverage at Hotel de Paris in Monaco, I received an offer to serve as hotel manager at the Vista Palace Hotel in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin in France. That was quite a special offer and one that would accelerate my career. The hotel was closed for renovations and I was assigned to project manage all aspects of the effort. Looking back, that was my first hotel opening, and one in which I was pushed to grow both personally and professionally. At first, I was very hesitant, but I realized that challenging me to lead prompted me to rise to the occasion. To this day I implement the same philosophy; challenge colleagues to do more, to be better, and to take on more responsibilities, and they too are surprised by how much they can achieve if asked to do so.

## SUCCESS FOLLOWS SUCCESS

After learning the ins and outs of renovations and restorations, I had gained an incredibly valuable and important skillset in the world of luxury hospitality. Following a successful overhaul of the Vista Palace Hotel in France, I was approached by two investors based in the United Kingdom to be general manager of a new five-star hotel. It would be named the Grand Hotel Le Touquet, have 135 rooms and suites, and

be built in Northern France. In this role, I deepened my renovation skills to include how to build a luxury hotel from scratch. As with any construction project, there were countless challenges and hiccups along the way, and often times you need to make very tough business decisions. But in the end, it was truly fulfilling to see this project to fruition and observing the experience of both staff and guests alike. You need to seek out and capitalize on opportunities that will expand and develop your skillets into new areas, even areas that you think are too hard to learn. It will all pay off in the long run.

## TRUE HOSPITALITY

Hospitality is the craft of knowing in advance what guests need and want, and at the heart of this anticipation is the notion of an unforgettable relationship between our colleagues and our guests. This is a relationship that needs to be nurtured before, during, and after every guest visit. It is also a relationship built on trust. Every guest entrusts their likes and dislikes with you, and they expect that information to not only be held in confidence, but to be acted upon and used to anticipate future requests.



## A LIFELONG JOURNEY

One of the most basic but incredibly important principles of leadership is to listen, and listen often. If you don't listen, you don't learn, and if you don't learn, you cannot evolve as a leader. A great hotel starts with a great owner, and I was blessed to have learned from the best. Whether at the Savoy Hotel in London, the Ritz London, or Hotel de Paris in Monaco, I took the opportunity to listen to everyone around me. To this day, I can say that I learned most of what I know on the job and through interactions with general managers, owners, investors, and other colleagues that I keenly observed and listened to. Always be open to new ideas, new ways of thinking, and new ways of doing business. It's a lifelong journey.



## ON THE FRONTLINES

My style of management is to create a relationship with each and every employee from day one. I walk the floor daily and speak to colleagues across the property in all positions. I always eat lunch at the employee restaurant, and spend two hours every evening in the lobby. I also spend a bit of time each morning attending line-up meetings with staff about to start their shift. Being visible, approachable, and engaged with your team is the only real way to build positive, trusting relationships rooted in open



communication. As a general manager, you need not spend your time in the back office at a computer. You need to be on the frontlines supporting your team in every way possible.

### A STRATEGIC SHIFT

When I joined this industry thirty years ago, the general manager was fully in charge of his or her hotel, operations, and team. Over this period, however, we have seen a substantial shift with the involvement of

asset managers, investors, and management companies. As a result, the vision and key strategic decisions are made at another level, and thus the general manager of today is more of an executor of that direction than an architect of it. This has also muddled the industry a bit in that it used to be known as the hotel business, and now it's more the business of hotels. Often times what is required to be successful in this industry is not aligned with the expectations or needs of owners, which can create friction.



### (NOT) ADDING VALUE

Do not implement a new technological system or management philosophy unless you are absolutely sure that it will enhance the employee or guest experience. We see new ways of doing things all the time, and you must be incredibly discerning before putting anything new and shiny into practice. These systems—Value Engineering, Optimization Management, Total Employee Involvement, Zero Defect, and

others—need to be fully evaluated before adopting. I believe such systems tend to keep managers in their back offices rather than on the floor, where they are supposed to be.

### TENNIS IN THE SKY

One of the most innovative marketing campaigns I was involved in was when we were preparing for the

Dubai Tennis Tournament, and we were conducting a photo shoot on the helipad of the Burj Al Arab hotel. An idea was born. We approached two very famous tennis champions staying at the hotel—Roger Federer and Andre Agassi—with the suggestion of creating a tennis court on the helipad for them to play a friendly match. They were both ecstatic and immediately agreed. It was a breath-taking scene that CNN broadcasted in near real time to its live, global audience. To this day, it is fondly remembered as a stroke of genius.

### THE NEW STANDARD

Today, there are a number of practices that have become standard to five-star luxury hotels. At check-in, guests are offered pressing services, newspapers, and preferred drinks. Guests are also guaranteed reservations in the restaurant and spa, and turn-down is a full-service offering with amenities refreshed, chocolate, night or hand cream, and more. Check-in time is whenever the guest arrives, and a late check-out is now expected.

### CONSTANT CONTACT

The next generation expects new services and offerings mediated by technology. Now, through in-room

tablets, guests can order meals, request that their car be ready at the entrance, and send messages directly to the concierge team. We've also implemented a concierge texting service to all of our guests to stay connected in real time, wherever they are. These kinds of communication tools are becoming part of the hotel experience.

### KNOWING THE SOURCE

While gastronomy has always been an important part of the hotel experience, travelers do not necessarily want fine dining all the time. The quality of produce and other ingredients are becoming increasingly important. Today's chefs must communicate where they purchase their product because guests are now very much interested in supporting local farms and sustainable practices. The standard for quality food at any time during the day or night has also been elevated in recent times. In addition, in the past, chefs would mostly remain in the kitchen, despite how much they were celebrated in books and magazines. Today, customers are interested in meeting the chef to express their appreciation of his or her talent.



# Mahmoud Skaf

AREA GENERAL MANAGER

THE RITZ-CARLTON, KUALA LUMPUR  
(MALAYSIA)

JW MARRIOTT KUALA LUMPUR (MALAYSIA)

THE MAJESTIC HOTEL KUALA LUMPUR  
(MALAYSIA)

HOTEL STRIPES KUALA LUMPUR  
(MALAYSIA)

THE RITZ-CARLTON, KOH SAMUI  
(THAILAND)

BORN IN: Arwad Island, Syria

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Malaysia, United States,  
China, Peru, Greece

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 29

**“One of the hallmarks of the luxury hospitality industry is never saying no to a guest request, no matter how big or small.”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up on Arward Island in the Mediterranean Sea. It is the only inhabited island in Syria. I loved to swim, fish, and most of all eat. I would always plead with my mother to let me help her in the kitchen when she cooked our meals. To this day, that remains one of my favorite memories of childhood—discovering and learning about food, flavors, and preparation. I studied electrical engineering and then worked part-time in hotels. I fell in love with the environment and was attracted to the opportunity of meeting people from all over the world. I was eager to learn about their cultures, languages, and traditions. I still remember the wise words of my mother from decades ago: “Do what makes you happy and always be humble.”

#### **INTERNAL GUESTS**

My first leadership role in the industry was as a supervisor in the kitchen. My manager at the time gave me some very insightful advice—treat your team as though they were internal guests of the property. This notion of colleagues as internal guests has stuck with me ever since. Through that frame, I became a more effective leader. I listened more. I built individual relationships with each of my colleagues and tailored their tasks to build on their strengths and turn around weaknesses. A simple change in perspective can alter your entire management philosophy.

#### **A WIN-WIN SITUATION**

As a general manager, you must take time out to teach and mentor your team. Your colleagues will look up to you for advice and insight for how to be





better, how to lead a team, and how to progress in the industry. In such a transient sector, one of the most important incentives for staff to remain at one property is professional development and opportunities for advancement. Steering staff up the ranks, empowering them to make decisions, allowing them to learn from their mistakes, and rewarding employees that go above and beyond are essential to building their confidence and keeping them engaged. After all, staff that are cared for will go the extra mile when taking care of guests. It's a true win-win.

### SETTING EXPECTATIONS

When I first became a senior manager, I sincerely thought I was ready. I was confident in embracing the new role, but when I quickly ran into challenges that I failed to anticipate, it was overwhelming and I fell short. Following this incident, I was coached by my immediate supervisor as to what the expectations were in this role, including what challenges and opportunities were on the horizon. I wish I had received this guidance earlier. Today, I sit with new employees



and discuss at length the expectations of the position, what they may or may not face, and how best I can support them along the way.

### ASK FOR HELP

One of the worst things you can do as a leader is to pretend to know something when you don't. There's nothing shameful about asking for help. In my experience, younger colleagues are sometimes not willing to ask for help or say that they don't know how to

do something. If you never ask for help, you will not succeed. Pride will not get you closer to success. It's my job to tell the younger generation that saying "I don't know" is not a bad thing. I have witnessed the downfall of senior managers because their immense pride prevented them from making sound decisions. Instead, they made terrible choices that had serious repercussions. The right course of action was to simply ask for guidance. The inability to accept the fact that they did not have all the answers contributed to their failure.

## TECHNOLOGY TRENDS

Our younger travelers are driven by technology, while we are driven by budgets and the direction set by the owners. In a world where technology is changing by the minute, it is very difficult to keep up with the latest trends and gadgets. Having said that, technology needs to be integrated insofar as it enhances the guest experience in a tangible way, rather than simply chasing the latest trend without understanding how it helps or hurts. In the end, technology must never replace the personal interaction that guests need and expect.

## REVIVING THE RITZ

For the relaunch of The Ritz-Carlton, Kuala Lumpur in 2016, we devised a campaign that balanced the classic legacy of the property with the refreshed and renewed modern design. To draw attention to this balance, we bought the usage rights to the song "Puttin' on the Ritz" and re-recorded a contemporary version. We used the new version in all of our radio and TV advertising, launch events, and public relations activities. It was a genuine success.





## THE HUMAN TOUCH

In a world dominated by Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social channels, it is incredibly easy to reach a global audience seamlessly and efficiently, but doing so on such a mass scale removes the human touch from the equation. As a leader of a group of hotels, our people are our most valuable asset. Technology must never replace personal interaction and personalized service, which is the true core of the hospitality industry.

## NEVER SAY NO

One of the hallmarks of the luxury hospitality industry is never saying no to a guest request, no matter how big or small. To this end, we will do everything within our power to fulfil such requests in a timely and personalized fashion, and we've empowered our staff to take action as they see fit without additional supervision. On one such occasion, there was a Chinese family visiting from Hong Kong. The father had Alzheimer's disease and he got lost in a shopping mall. Our staff quickly embarked on a search for him and ultimately found him safe in someone's home in Shah Alam—a neighborhood approximately 25 km from the hotel.



## ADAPT TO CHANGE, HIRE YOUNG

To better understand the needs, expectations, and trends of young travelers, we hire staff of that generation who are quick to help us as a company to learn and adapt. These travelers expect not only luxury experiences, but increased efficiency and convenience in their dealings with the hotel—far more than the older generation. Internalizing their needs

allows us to better personalize their stay and service them appropriately. We make this conscientious effort because it's incumbent upon us to innovate, stay relevant, and cater to all guests, each of which is important.



# Marc C. Brugger

MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
ROSEWOOD HONG KONG (HONG KONG)  
ROSEWOOD BEIJING (CHINA)

BORN IN:

Lausanne, Switzerland

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Hong Kong, China, Ireland, India,  
Malaysia, Mexico, Thailand,  
Switzerland

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

23

*Photos Courtesy of Rosewood Beijing*

**“Today’s travelers are affluent explorers. Wherever they go, they are curious and constantly looking for inspiring, authentic experiences rich in culture and history. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

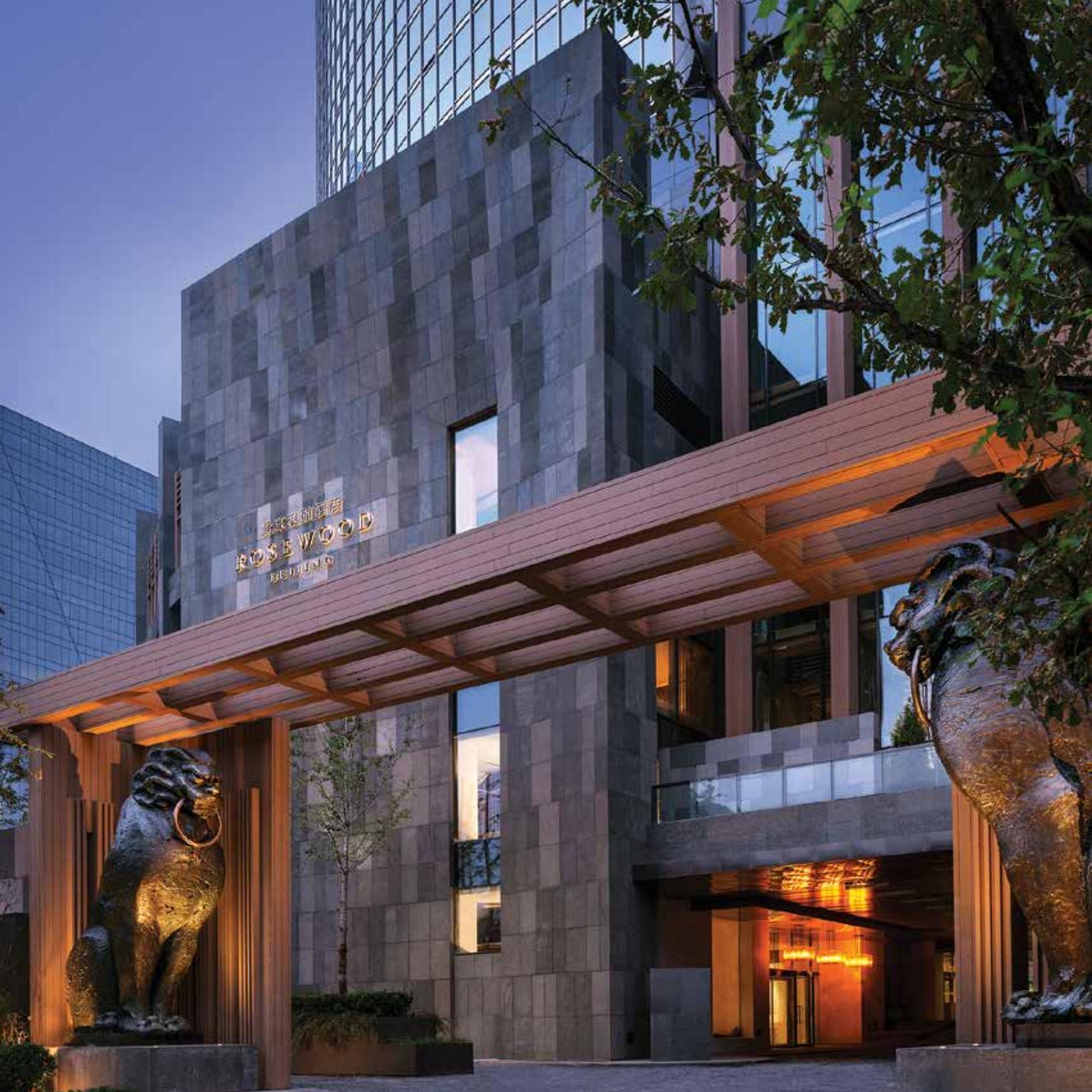
I grew up in French-speaking Lausanne, Switzerland, but I spent almost all of my vacation time with my grandparents and other family members in the small alpine village of Meiringen, in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. With relatives scattered as far away as Zimbabwe, summers often felt like a global reunion.

Back in 1882, my family founded the first so-called “graphic arts” company in Switzerland, and for many years produced a range of advertising material to promote palaces, five-star hotels, and tourism boards around the country. When I was young, I started traveling throughout Switzerland with my grandfather or uncle, accompanying them on business trips to visit clients. In those days, business was conducted at a much more personal level, often resulting in overnight stays at these glamorous properties. Experi-

riencing legendary establishments such as the Gstaad Palace or the Hotel Barriere Le Normandy undoubtedly left some lasting impressions.

#### **DAY ONE**

My first job in the hospitality industry was as a waiter on the terrace of the Royal Savoy Hotel & Spa in Lausanne, Switzerland. It was my first day and I had just bought brand new shoes with leather soles for the occasion. Inevitably, I slipped with two plates in my hand. The first dish ended up exactly as plated, but on the tablecloth without a plate. The second plate, with fresh tomato sauce, ended up on the immaculate white dress of a guest. This was not a great first day, but I did learn three things: never underestimate seemingly easy tasks; stay humble; and don’t wear new shoes on your first day.



瑰丽酒店  
ROSEWOOD  
BEIJING

## A FORK IN THE ROAD

I was debating up until the last minute where I should pursue my studies—the HEC business school in Paris or focus on hospitality at Ecole Hoteliere de Lausanne. I visited both schools, and when I saw the atmosphere at EHL, suddenly all of my early memories and emotions came back to me from traveling to glamorous hotels when I was young. I wanted to join an industry where I could create those memories for others.

## RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME

I had just completed my corporate training program at a fine dining restaurant that was part of a hotel in Cancun, Mexico. At the time, a long-time restaurant manager had departed for another hotel and a new manager was brought in. He was unable to earn the respect of the wait staff, who had all been working there at least twelve years prior, when the restaurant had opened. This bitterness created an unhealthy dynamic. Very soon after, he was let go. At this point, it was very difficult to find yet another replacement.

Having earned the trust and respect of the team in just a few short weeks during my corporate training, it was the wait staff who suggested to the general manager that I be hired for the role. It's not every day

that the very team you are meant to lead is the one that wants you in charge. As a newcomer to a deeply-knowledgeable team, I realized that regardless of your position, you very often learn more from your colleagues than they do from you.

## COLLEAGUES AS FRIENDS

Office politics is the worst professional cancer there is. Although it's not foolproof, being direct or tactfully blunt is often the best way to avoid the politics, even if it cuts both ways at times. An ideal working environment is where colleagues work together as friends—respecting, appreciating, and supporting each other to realize a shared vision.

## SET THE TONE

Collin Powell, a retired four-star general in the United States Army, once said that if a leader doesn't convey passion and intensity, then there will be no passion and intensity within the organization, and they'll start to fall down and get depressed. He is absolutely right. The style of leadership and interaction among the executive team sets the tone for the rest of the hotel. It doesn't mean we have to agree on every decision, but we need to always be decisive and move forward with purpose and passion.



## TRUST YOUR GUT

After conducting literally hundreds of interviews over the years, I very much rely on my gut instinct. It's mostly right. Anyone can rehearse a perfect answer to a range of classic or tricky interview questions, but the adage is still a very valid principle—hire for attitude and train for skills.

## AN UNEXPECTED INTERVIEW

One of the most important questions to ask when hiring a new colleague is in fact not a question at all. It relates more to behavior, a set of values, and a sense of observation. In this industry, you are often reacting to the unexpected. You must be quick on your feet, calm in the face of stress, and keenly observant of guests. When we conducted a mass recruitment for guest contact associates, we sat them all in a waiting room and asked them to watch a video of a couple ballroom dancing—without telling them why. At the end, we asked them to replicate the dance steps with the person next to them. This had nothing to do with whether they could dance, and everything to do with observing their reaction to a situation they clearly did not anticipate.



## AN HONEST MISTAKE

As a leader, it's important to coach and not micro-manage. Trust and empower your colleagues to make their own decisions and their own mistakes. We all make the wrong decision sometimes, but the question is whether that mistake was made in good faith.

If it's an honest mistake, it's not a mistake. It's a lesson learned. Fortunately for us, an honest mistake is not the end of the world. We're in the hospitality business, not the nuclear weapons business.



## PERSONALIZED DEVELOPMENT

One of the most important aspects of leadership is how you invest in and continually develop the skills of your team. That is a bespoke process, as each individual is exactly that—an individual. For some, they may benefit from exposure to another hotel. Others may require more one-on-one executive coaching

sessions. Others still may benefit from online courses or attending specific seminars or conferences. A tailored path to individual development is good for the team member and the company. As they develop new skills and seek professional advancement, you're able to groom them into future roles with more responsibility—retaining their talent, passion, and loyalty.

## THE TALENT PIPELINE

In very dynamic and booming markets like Beijing or Hong Kong, it is difficult to compete with the sheer number of opportunities available to join the industry. Attracting, selecting, retaining, and developing the right associates to continually reinforce the culture of the company and hotel is therefore an industry-wide challenge.

## AFFLUENTIAL EXPLORERS

Today's travelers are affluent explorers. Wherever they go, they are curious and constantly looking for inspiring, authentic experiences rich in culture and history. Hotels are no longer just a place to sleep, but integral to journeys of exploration and self-discovery.

## A SENSE OF PLACE

At Rosewood Beijing, the thread of provenance and history runs throughout, from Mongolian blue stone used extensively in the hotel's façade, to stacked timber in the interiors. Reclaimed bricks discovered at a demolition site on the outskirts of Beijing are featured in bars and restaurants. Upon arrival, guests first encounter the imposing, bronze *Jiao Tu* (Sons of Dragon) sculptures, which stand on either side of the entrance and act as the hotel's guardians.

As guests continue into the central lobby, they will discover the towering paintings inspired by traditional *shan shui* landscape paintings that have their origins in the Song dynasty (960-1279). Also, we intend to nurture and support new local talent—artists who are forging their careers and carving out a name for themselves in China and around the world.

## THE DIGITAL ARENA

Today, especially in China, word-of-mouth via social media is critical. At Rosewood Beijing, we are very active on social media platforms, including Weibo and WeChat. The best way to adapt to social media is to become an active participant. We are grateful to anyone who takes the time to express a personal review, and we listen carefully to those views on social media and other forums, responding thoughtfully and quickly. However, we always remind ourselves not to be drawn into technology for its own sake. Hospitality is a people business, and we must never let technology cause us to lose our humanity.

## THE POCKET CONCIERGE

We keep in touch and assist our guests at every stage of their visit through an e-butler service. Our concierge team is available via texting so that guests can

seek advice wherever they are in the city. It's like carrying a concierge with all of his or her knowledge, resources, and contacts in your pocket. Beijing is a huge city and it is easy to get lost or confused; having that link to our butler team is like having a personal friend you can rely on at all times.

### ABOVE AND BEYOND

One of our butlers once passed on information about his guest's favorite vodka cocktail and travel preferences to their next hotel. And it wasn't even a Rosewood hotel. When our guest found out, they were completely in awe of our colleague's thoughtfulness and attention to detail. For select other guests, we offer embroidered pillow covers with their initials, and sometimes arrange specific books to suit their interests. Personalization is a hallmark of this industry.





西宮貴室

書畫·圖書文藝類

圖書及藝術類



Marc  
von  
Arnim

GENERAL MANAGER,  
PARK HYATT SYDNEY  
(AUSTRALIA)

BORN IN:  
Brisbane, Australia

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:  
Australia, New Zealand, India,  
Korea

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:  
25

Photos Courtesy of Park Hyatt Sydney

**“Don’t ever ask a colleague to do something you’re not willing to do yourself. If we are busy in the restaurant, I will happily clear tables, replenish the buffet, and make coffee. If we are busy for a VIP arrival, I will step in to be a porter and deliver bags. ”**

#### GROWING UP

I grew up on a farm about four hours west of Brisbane, Australia. It was an amazing childhood with lots of freedom and space, but I learned very quickly that a farm requires both teamwork and hard work to maintain. My parents had an unstoppable work ethic, often working seven days a week when I was young. Of the many lessons they taught me, I learned that hard work, dedication, and being passionate about something you love are hallmarks of success. From a leadership lens, they also taught me to be humble and consult with others when I don’t know something, and never be afraid to make a decision once you have all the facts. They sacrificed much for my sister and me, affording us many opportunities to receive a great education.

#### AN EARLY PASSION, A YOUNG LEADER

When I was sixteen, I had my first experience working for a hotel and realized quickly that I loved the industry, and that I had a passion for meeting new people and making them happy. After high school, I took a job as a banquet waiter for the Hyatt Regency Coolum in Australia. In my first managerial role as team leader of housekeeping, I realized that I was now in a position where my colleagues were relying on me to give guidance and direction. This was new to me. I had to be a leader and not a follower, so I stepped up to the plate and learned on the job.



## A PERSONAL CONNECTION

An ideal relationship between our staff and our guests is one of personal connection. This is the art of understanding the true preferences of a guest and delivering an anticipatory service. Achieving this connection requires interaction, but you need to be able to build a relationship in a very short period of time. You must be curious, observant, and conversational about what interests a guest and how best you can provide for their needs. Only through interaction will you intuit how best to tailor your service.

## ONE TEAM

Don't ever ask a colleague to do something you're not willing to do yourself. If we are busy in the restaurant, I will happily clear tables, replenish the buffet, and make coffee. If we are busy for a VIP arrival, I will step in to be a porter and deliver bags. If our ultimate goal is to create a memorable, unique, and flawless experience for our guests, everything we do is in service of that goal. Therefore, we are all one team working together with a shared purpose; whether you are a porter or a general manager, every job is valued and essential to success.

## THE MEANING OF LEADERSHIP

As a general manager, you must lead, not dictate. A leader is someone who will guide and mentor his or her team, empower them to make decisions, and encourage them to grow both personally and professionally. You need to create an environment that is transparent and conducive to sharing what works, what doesn't work, and how things could be improved. At the same time, you need to allow and empower your team to think and do for themselves—coming up with solutions to problems they've identified and acting upon them. If you are constantly telling your team what to do and how to do it, micromanaging their every move, you will create a very negative environment that breeds resentment and hostility.

## EMBRACING THE OTHER

The hospitality industry is one that embodies a diversity of cultures, backgrounds, and ways of life. We must be compassionate and understanding of these differences, as they will be reflected in our colleagues and our guests from all over the world. However, this is not simply about respecting and embracing diversity. Understanding the nuances of different cultures, religions, and nationalities allows us to better personalize our service offering to guests, and personalization is the hallmark of a luxury hotel.



## FROM THE HEART

When interviewing applicants, I look for people that speak from the heart and display a level of emotional intelligence. The luxury hotel industry is about how we make the customer feel, and therefore part of the interview process is simply using your intuition when interacting with an applicant. We can teach skills, but we can't teach empathy or compassion. At the same time, the only way to stay ahead of the curve in this industry is by hiring and developing leaders, not followers. Sometimes there are individuals that don't

yet realize how much they can really accomplish. Therefore, it's very important to identify leadership potential, invest in professional development, and empower colleagues to be confident, as this combination can propel them to new heights.

## NEW RECRUITS

On the first day of a new recruit, I attend their orientation to explain more about what we're looking for, what the expectations are, and what our larger vi-



sion is for the hotel. I also talk about my own humble background and early experiences, why I chose this industry, and how I progressed over the years into my current role. I try to inspire them the best I can so that they too can plot their own futures. We then orient new staff to their new department, which can take anywhere from two days to two weeks, depending on the position. Instituting a buddy system has worked very well to ensure seamless integration and training. New recruits are paired with experienced colleagues, who serve as a sounding board while setting the standards of the position in real time.

### ALWAYS ENGAGE

As a leader, you must engage your team on a daily basis. Spend time learning about each and every colleague so that you can connect on a personal level and ensure they are happy both personally and professionally. You cannot have one without the other, and in the service business, a happy employee makes a happy guest.

## THE SOUL OF A HOTEL

One of the reasons I continually connect strong leadership and management abilities with how one recruits, appreciates, invests in, and supports employees, is because some of the biggest drivers of guest loyalty, and therefore profit, are the staff themselves. The personal relationships they've built over time with our guests cannot be overstated. Building a hotel is not hard. All you need is money. The real challenge is creating the heart and soul of that hotel, and that can only come from a world-class team.

## THE CONCIERGE

Despite guests being able to dig up all kinds of information about a particular city or location prior to their visit, there are a number of reasons why the sheer availability of this information will not replace the concierge. In fact, today, they are more important than ever.

First, there is too much information online. It can be unorganized, inaccurate, out of date, and layered with mixed reviews. More often than not, this information is solely focused on the most-visited landmarks and attractions, which is not necessarily what our guests are interested in. Second, it takes an untold number of hours to sort through every-

thing online and even then, you would want a second opinion from our concierge to ensure that what you discovered is reliable. Third, guests are now looking for the most authentic local experiences that only the most knowledgeable of concierges can provide. And fourth, a concierge can anticipate and propose experiences and itineraries tailored to your likes and dislikes. The Internet cannot.

## A SIMPLE GESTURE

Anticipatory, personalized service does not need to be complicated. I am a firm believer in a simple gesture, such as calling guests on their birthday regardless of whether they're staying with you or not. If they are a wine or food lover, I would handwrite a note with a suggestion of a wine they might consider trying or to highlight a restaurant that may have opened since their last visit. A tailored experience might also include ensuring their favorite magazines are in their room to read, or handpicking a local wine based on their past preferences with a note that explains why it was chosen. The most important thing is to remember and acknowledge.





# Mariano Silvestri

**GENERAL MANAGER,  
PARK HYATT HADAHAA  
(MALDIVES)**

**BORN IN:**

San Rafael, Argentina

**SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:**

Maldives, China, United Arab  
Emirates, Argentina

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:**

19

*Photos Courtesy of Park Hyatt Maldives*



**“As a leader, I always treat colleagues in housekeeping, engineering, and the kitchen with the same respect and dignity I would the most honored hotel guest. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up as a typical Argentine boy. Football, football, and more football. I was very lucky to grow up in a beautiful, healthy place overlooked by the Andes Mountains. There was clean air, wide-open space, and fantastic home cooking. My mother loved our family fiercely and was a constant source of inspiration. My father taught me the importance of being persistent. Hailing from a humble family of Italian immigrants, he became a surgeon through sheer determination and will. One of the most important lessons my parents taught me was that I'm no better than anyone else. We are all human. We are all equal. This was an important guiding philosophy as I went about my career. As a leader, I always treat colleagues in housekeeping, engineering, and the kitchen with the same respect and dignity I would the most honored hotel guest.

#### **A FAMILY OF COLLEAGUES**

My first job in the hospitality business was as an assistant in the HR department of a ski center in Argentina. I watched my boss calling the parents of my colleagues to inform them that their children had lost their lives while working on the dangerous mountain. It was a truly intense experience that taught me a great deal about empathy, compassion, friendship, and treating colleagues as family.

#### **VALUE EVERY POSITION**

I stepped into my first leadership role as housekeeping supervisor at Park Hyatt Mendoza in Argentina. This position set the tone for my entire career, as I learned to truly value, respect, and appreciate the importance of the back-of-the-house operation. I internalized the fact that every single employee—no



matter which department—was doing essential work to the success of the hotel.

### SETTING THE TONE

One of the most important leadership lessons I've learned is to lead by example. Treat your employees with a level of care, respect, and appreciation, and that same treatment will translate to other colleagues and guests. However, if you disrespect your team, that too will translate to other colleagues and guests. In other words, the tone is set from the top.

### A BALANCING ACT

Here at Park Hyatt Maldives Hadahaa, the very nature of our resort means that our guests most certainly value their privacy. Our secluded location is ideal for those truly wanting to get "off the grid." Giving guests a sense of privacy while still being sensitive to their needs is a fine balance because, after all, no guest wants to feel abandoned, however private they are. But at the top end of the hotel industry, we have our techniques. Discretion and sensitivity are key to making our guests feel comfortable. For example, de-

spite constant requests to fly drones over our resort, we imposed a complete ban on these devices. The photos would be incredible, but we feel that the privacy and exclusivity of our guests is more important.

### **RESPECT IS EARNED**

I try to be as visible and approachable as possible. I take most of my meals in the staff canteen. I make an effort to learn everyone's name and a little about them and their families. I do this because I remember my time very well at the lower rung of the ladder. A little friendly interaction can go a long way. If you want to be respected as a leader, you must give your colleagues something to respect you for.

### **FINDING MIDDLE GROUND**

Always listen to two or more sides of the story. This is equally important when dealing with guest requests or complaints, as it is when dealing with issues within your own team. Often, the issue is a matter of interpretation or a genuinely different point of view. In either case, when each side understands the other, both parties are much more likely to find middle ground.

### **HOLISTIC HIRING**

The most important quality I look for in potential employees is whether they have integrity. We can teach a new recruit to do almost anything, but there are things we can't teach—integrity, honesty, and hard work. The most educated or the most experienced candidate isn't always the best fit for the property, either. I approach the recruitment process with a holistic understanding of our needs and circumstances. Will this person integrate well into our current team? Are they suited for the particularities of this property? Are they aligned with our values and vision?

### **SUCCESSION PLANNING**

Securing a talent pipeline to meet the needs of the organization now and into the future is one of biggest challenges facing a general manager. In other words, succession planning is critical to ensuring continuity of success. With this in mind, we developed a very organic plan for all levels of the team. Directors are constantly nurturing and developing their managers to succeed them, and this process is replicated down the line and throughout the organization. This kind of planning and ethos is also an important tool to retain and promote top talent, as your team will place a high value on the opportunity to advance.

## OPPOSITE ENDS

One of the most important observations one can make about the luxury hotel industry is the remarkable shift in perception of luxury by different generations. Millennials and Baby Boomers are at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of what they desire from their stay. Baby Boomers are normally associated with consumerism and ostentatious displays of luxury products, while millennials put much more emphasis on experiences, uniqueness, and authenticity. Parking your car with a valet was once considered a sign of wealth. Today, that inference does not apply. Society has changed. What people value has changed. And the definition of luxury has changed.

## FEELING IMPORTANT

When a guest has a genuine grievance, they are more than happy to see a mistake get corrected or a problem rectified. Most guests are not out to elicit freebies. My ultimate aim is to anticipate a problem before it becomes one, but I always thank guests for bringing their issues to my attention. After all, they are helping me by voicing their concerns so another guest doesn't have to. To engage guests who have had a past grievance, we invite some of them to participate in an expert team effort to help us improve our service.







## BEHIND THE CURTAIN

The only way you will survive in this business is if you truly love your job. This is a lifestyle that will not love you back—sleepless nights, unsociable hours, rushed meals, and endless hours on your feet. It can take a toll on your body and mind. Passion will serve as your fuel, so make sure it's in abundance. Also, try to find a partner who understands the industry. If not, they will have a difficult time understanding why you missed another birthday or forgot another anniversary. Fortunately, my wife is very understanding.

## A TRULY UNIQUE LOCATION

The island of Hadahaa is unique, not just in the Maldives, but in the world. Our 360-degree unspoiled house reef and proximity to the equator put all kinds of experiences literally on our guests' doorstep. They can step out of their villa and find themselves in an underwater wonderland within moments, or hop on a boat and experience an equator crossing like no other. Being so far from the capital of the Maldives and the inevitable boat and air traffic that it entails, guests can experience true peace, tranquility, and remoteness.



## AUTHENTIC INTERACTIONS

We pay a lot of attention to our online presence, particularly on Facebook, where we have an engaged following. Nowadays, I feel that authenticity and responsiveness in digital interactions is the most important aspect of our online strategy. If your guests can feel your spirit and philosophy come through their screen and into their home, they are more likely to feel like they know your brand and can hold you close to their hearts. However, I also believe that print will always have its place. There's something

about holding a book or magazine that can't be replaced digitally. Also, my wife is a magazine journalist, so it's part of my wedding vows to believe in print.

## A NEW REALITY

With TripAdvisor's recent shift in ranking and scoring systems—giving the most recent reviews more "power" than older ones—it has become even more important to pay special attention to such platforms. One bad review can really knock down your score,





but it does keep us on our toes. I think every hotelier has had the experience of an undeservedly bad review, and it can really be crushing. I personally had a prospective guest, who cancelled last minute, give a horribly scathing review despite having never even visited the hotel. Those reviews feel so unfair and there's very little one can do about it.

### A SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

I appreciate the instant feedback of digital review platforms. As our reviews are overwhelmingly positive, it is satisfying to see those scores and positive comments stack up on TripAdvisor and other forums. Quite often, though, a score is a very subjective experience. One guest may feel that a great trip deserves a three stars while another guest with exactly the same experience may mark it a five. It's certainly an imperfect system, but we will continue to do our best to satisfy guests on the island and hope that those efforts go rewarded online. One of my common disappointments is to find out through an online review a complaint about something that, if given the chance, I could have rectified immediately.



# Michael Ziemer

**GENERAL MANAGER,  
MANDARIN ORIENTAL, TAIPEI  
(TAIWAN)**

**BORN IN:**

New South Wales, Australia

**SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:**

Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia,  
Germany, Saudi Arabia, Macau

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:**

30

*Photos Courtesy of Mandarin Oriental Taipei*

**“When making decisions of consequence, harness the insights and experience of your team to inform your thinking. Your goal is to make the best possible decision, not the fastest. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up in a very small town called Tumut in New South Wales, Australia. As a country boy, I spent most of my time outdoors, bike riding, swimming, and exploring. My family migrated from Germany to Australia only fifteen years after World War II, so they were very grateful to be given the opportunity to work hard and pursue a better life. Being raised in this environment taught me to respect and appreciate the value of hard work. My father was disciplined and always had high expectations, while my mother was spirited and very passionate. They both taught me from a very young age that whatever you do, never compromise or take shortcuts. Do it right the first time.

#### **COMRADERY**

My first job in the industry was as a Banquet Captain for an outside catering company in Sydney. This was a part-time job while I studied, and one of the most striking aspects of my time there was experiencing the comradery of those who worked in hospitality. It was the epitome of a team effort, and that was an early leadership lesson.

#### **MADE FOR THIS**

At first, I wanted to be a chef. However, during the interview process, the executive chef who interviewed me suggested that I explore a career in hotel management because he was impressed with my communication skills. I soon turned my attention to becoming a hotelier, and I haven't looked back since.

## **PLEASE SIGN HERE**

My first leadership position in the industry was as a banquet manager for Noahs Northside Gardens Hotel in North Sydney. This position taught me very quickly that the buck stopped with me, and that as a leader, I needed to take on the responsibility of delivering on the expectations of customers. I also learned to make sure that customers signed for the bill before the event (and drinking) began, ensuring payment was made for services provided.

## **BUILDING A TEAM**

One of the most important aspects of leadership is fully understanding and appreciating your own strengths and weaknesses. We are not good at all things. Therefore, you must surround yourself with talented people who, together, bring to the table a set of distinct and valuable skillsets that compliment and strengthen each other. In addition, you want thinkers and doers. Surround yourself with people who ask why. A healthy debate and discussion with different perspectives always leads to better decisions.

## **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES MATTER**

Having worked in many different environments over the years, I learned to lead and cater to a very diverse, culturally rich group of people, who hailed from all over the world. I learned to respect, understand, and cater to difference, both on the staff side as well as the guest side. For example, in Saudi Arabia many of my employees were from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. In Germany, our guests were normally very wealthy Germans who had a very high expectation of quality service. In Asia, the service culture is revered, and I learned to integrate that ethos into our team to ensure we delivered on expectations.

## **DON'T RUSH**

When making decisions of consequence, take a proper amount of time to think it through, deliberate, and discuss with others. Harness the insights and experience of your team to inform your thinking. At the same time, being inclusive of your team is an asset, not a liability. The younger generation in particular is eager to voice their feedback and opinion on how to improve offerings and services. Allow them to participate in the decision-making process. This empowers them as employees and encourages them to stay engaged. Your goal is to make the best possible decision, not the fastest.





## NEVER TOO SENIOR

Humbleness is one of the most important qualities of a successful leader. Roll up your sleeves and help whenever it is necessary. We are never too senior to step in and lend a hand. That's the very definition of teamwork. After all, everything we do is rooted in our collective desire to deliver an extraordinary guest experience.



## LUXURY ATTRACTS LUXURY

Over the years, I've observed that high quality employees who have a genuine interest and understanding of the luxury sector will always outperform other colleagues who merely work in luxury hospitality. It may seem like an insignificant difference, but that extra bit of interest translates to an even more passionate employee and a better guest experience.

## LEARNING BY EMPOWERING

As a leader, you need to trust and empower your employees to make decisions—good ones and bad ones. The only way they will learn and grow is by doing. I would rather them ask me for forgiveness than for permission. You learn from your mistakes, and that's exactly what I did.



## THREE QUESTIONS

When interviewing a recruit, there are three core questions I ask: Why do you wish to join this hotel? What have you heard about us in the market? And what would you like to get from this experience? I believe that these three questions, answered honestly, give you a deep level of insight into the person and whether they are fully committed to the opportunity.

## BEYOND HUMAN RESOURCES

The most important element of your operations is your team. Investing in their professional development is critical to staff motivation, growth, retention, and consistently delivering high quality service as the industry advances. This is not simply a function relegated to human resources. Departmental managers must be actively engaged in their team's strengths,



weaknesses, and plans for the future, charting a personalized path for growth.

### (UN)COMMITTED

When I first entered this industry, I went to school, decided on a career, and then went for it. I didn't have the ambition or wherewithal to explore other careers later on. In the 1980s, this was simply not done. But times have changed. Millennials today do not commit to careers early on, so it is becoming difficult to plan long-term. They want to experience as much as possible, across industries and positions, before deciding on what they enjoy the most. This presents a challenge in recruiting and retaining employees.

### NOT JUST A JOB

The luxury hospitality industry demands hard work, discipline, and long hours. It is a lifestyle and not just a job. You must have a deep passion for working with people, as you spend much of your time with hotel staff and guests. To be successful, too, you must always be evaluating who your customers are, what they're looking for, and how best to anticipate their needs. In the end, everything is about the guest experience.

### A CLASS UNTO ITSELF

We are the most luxurious hotel in Taiwan. Our guests hear about our hotel from afar and want to experience it. It's an attraction unto itself due to the style, ambience, and at times because of the guests we attract. One of the toughest challenges in this business is consistently maintaining such a high bar of excellence and service.

### SOCIAL AMPLIFIER

The most powerful form of digital marketing today is when guests share their hotel experience on Facebook, Line, WeChat, Instagram, and others. The challenge, or opportunity, is to figure out how best to participate, support, and encourage that engagement.

### HOME AWAY FROM HOME

One of the ways in which we may make a regular guest feel at home is by having a framed photo of their family, loved one, or pet in the room when they arrive. We obtain this information from their assistant who booked the room, their partner, friend, or from their Facebook. This makes for a wonderful surprise.



# Nicholas Yarnell

**GENERAL MANAGER,  
SIX SENSES DOURO VALLEY  
(PORTUGAL)**

**BORN IN:**

New York City, United States

**SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:**

Portugal, Morocco, France,  
Maldives, Indonesia,  
Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:**

28

*Photos Courtesy of Six Senses Hotels Resorts Spa*



**“I’ve learned to always hire an optimistic young person with a burning desire to do good work over an experienced professional with years of potentially bad habits and culture to unravel.”**

#### GROWING UP

I grew up in New York, Paris, Toronto, Mallorca, and ultimately London. My mother raised three kids and looked after the family with love and care, instilling in me a passion for food and to be kind above all things. My father worked in the heyday of advertising in the 1960s and, at age twenty-eight, became the youngest vice president in the history of a famous Madison Avenue ad agency in New York. He instilled in me the incredible gift of intellectual curiosity, and taught me that talent needs room to grow and develop.

While studying at the LSE, I started working odd jobs in hotels to make ends meet. I thought because I spoke a few different languages and wanted to travel, this may be a good fit. My first job was at Claridge’s Hotel in London as an intern, and that’s where it all started.

#### A DIFFICULT BOSS

My first real job in the hospitality business was in one of the kitchens of the Savoy Hotel in London. At the time, the head chef, while super talented, was very difficult to work with. I learned a lot about how far people can be pushed, what kind of environment is helpful rather than hurtful, and internalized those warning signs so that I could recognize them in myself and others.

#### MANUAL LABOR

In landing my first leadership position, I served as front office manager of the Connaught Hotel in London. Back then, everything was done manually. We used a beautiful paper book that held all of our reservations. Learning all aspects of the property-man-





agement system in a manual way gave me a profound understanding of the importance of being precise and accurate.

## THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF TENSION

Hire the right people, give them the proper training and tools, and ensure you set the bar high enough so there is room to grow. There also needs be the right amount of tension in the system—a sense of purpose, timeliness, unwavering support of each other, and a culture that continually strives for excellence. Just like a musical instrument, it's all in the tuning. To build such a team, I've learned to always hire optimistic young people with a burning desire to do good work, and to avoid experienced professionals with years of potentially bad habits and culture to unravel.

## SUPPORT HIGH PERFORMERS

You must be fair with your team, but not only in the traditional sense of treating everyone equally with respect, dignity, and appreciation. You must also pay special attention to high performers and ensure they are properly recognized and rewarded. Too many managers make the fatal error of spending 80 percent of their time on supporting underperformers and 20 percent on their top-tier employees. It should

be the other way around. This is tied to the notion of strength management. Ensure you are putting people in roles that play to their strengths. Get them to do more of what they love and not to focus so much on what they don't.

### MUNDANE INTO MEMORABLE

Ideally, you want your team to be able to execute the technical aspects of their jobs to such a level of mastery that they hardly have to think about it. This would allow their emotional intelligence and intuition to shine so that they can engage with guests and are able to personalize the experience by turning the mundane into the memorable.

### A THOUGHTFUL ACT

One day, a young American woman with a serious peanut allergy checked in to our hotel. When she showed up nervously for her first meal in the restaurant, the server greeted her and immediately told her that we were expecting her, and that the chefs were fully aware of her allergy. She need not worry about it during her stay. The meal went well, and as she left the restaurant the server handed her a little card on which he had written a note in Portuguese. He told her that she need not fear going out to local

restaurants. All she had to do was hand this card to the manager and they would understand. That simple thoughtful act cost nothing, but it brought tears to her eyes.

### RISK VS. REWARD

The most important lesson I learned was in Marrakech, Morocco, when we opened a hotel that was failing to differentiate itself in a hypercompetitive market. We woke up and started to create experiences, pop-up bars and restaurants, and inject a little fun into what we were doing. It saved us. I learned that we must experiment and foster risk-taking, which involves cycling through mistakes and failures quickly until you find things that work and that will drive business and brand loyalty. As a leader, you need to make sure you encourage others to step out into the unknown, rather than to always play it safe.

### CULTURE CHANGE IS HARD

When I arrived at one famous hotel, people seemed to be stuck in a culture of mistrust. They worked in silos, with information being shared on a need-to-know basis. It was disastrous. I learned that changing a poorly created culture, even for one that is intuitively better, more inclusive, and more open, takes



longer than you think. You have to be willing to take a deep dive into process to see how people are actually spending their time; then you discover real opportunities for improvement. While many routines are essential to create a consistent, measurable, and efficient operation, eliminate pointless routines that stifle creativity and constrict thinking.

### THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

Stress always accompanies the pursuit of excellence. The trick is not to allow yourself to be overwhelmed by stress. It is not stress that makes us ill, but how we respond to stressful events. Opening hotels teaches you this. You need incredible reserves of patience and a “learning” mind-set, because the first few years in a



hotel's existence is a messy, organic business. Turnover is typically over 50 percent in an opening year, and for good reason; openings are hard.

You must absorb lots of frustration and negative feedback from guests who demand perfection, and at the same time remain eternally positive and optimis-

tic with the team, carefully managing the amount of stress and tension in the system. Too much and people will burn out. Too little and they won't improve fast enough. The truth is that no matter how much you've prepared and trained prior to an opening, it takes time for the hotel to be running optimally. You must make a conscious choice to play the long game.

## A SENSE OF PLACE

When we came to designing the interiors of Six Senses Douro Valley, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century manor house, we invited the family who lived in the house until the 1980s to explain to us how the house functioned, and then incorporated many of those elements into the design. For example, the billiard table is where the billiard table used to be. Same goes for the open kitchen. We scoured the countryside for old industrial antiques; thus, all of the art is local, recycled, or upcycled. All the fabrics and materials are from the area. There are no imported Italian lamps. The net result is a design that is local, authentic, contemporary, comfortable, and calming.

As you enter the reception you may not notice it immediately, but all of the senses will be addressed and harmonized. You will see candles, hear water from the fountains, smell figs from the organic scent dif-

fuser, take in the beauty of the valley from the viewing platform, and be able to taste a great local wine or tea. That level of sensory detail has been thought through at every stage.

## DELIGHT AND SURPRISE

We spend a great deal of time and effort crafting experiences that will delight and surprise our guests. Our unique Earth Lab, for example, is a space dedicated to all questions about sustainability, where guests can do workshops on how to pickle and dehydrate food from the organic garden. Other activities may include tree climbing, stand-up paddle boarding, and hiking through the vineyards. The Alchemy Bar in the spa is where we teach how to make scrubs and a variety of domestic cosmetics. There are also a range of mindfulness experiences, including a singing bowl meditation. Our resident artist, Helena Ferreira, who is a world-renowned *azulajo* artist, teaches tile painting. We have more than thirty activities per week, and all are complimentary.

## VIRTUALLY ZERO

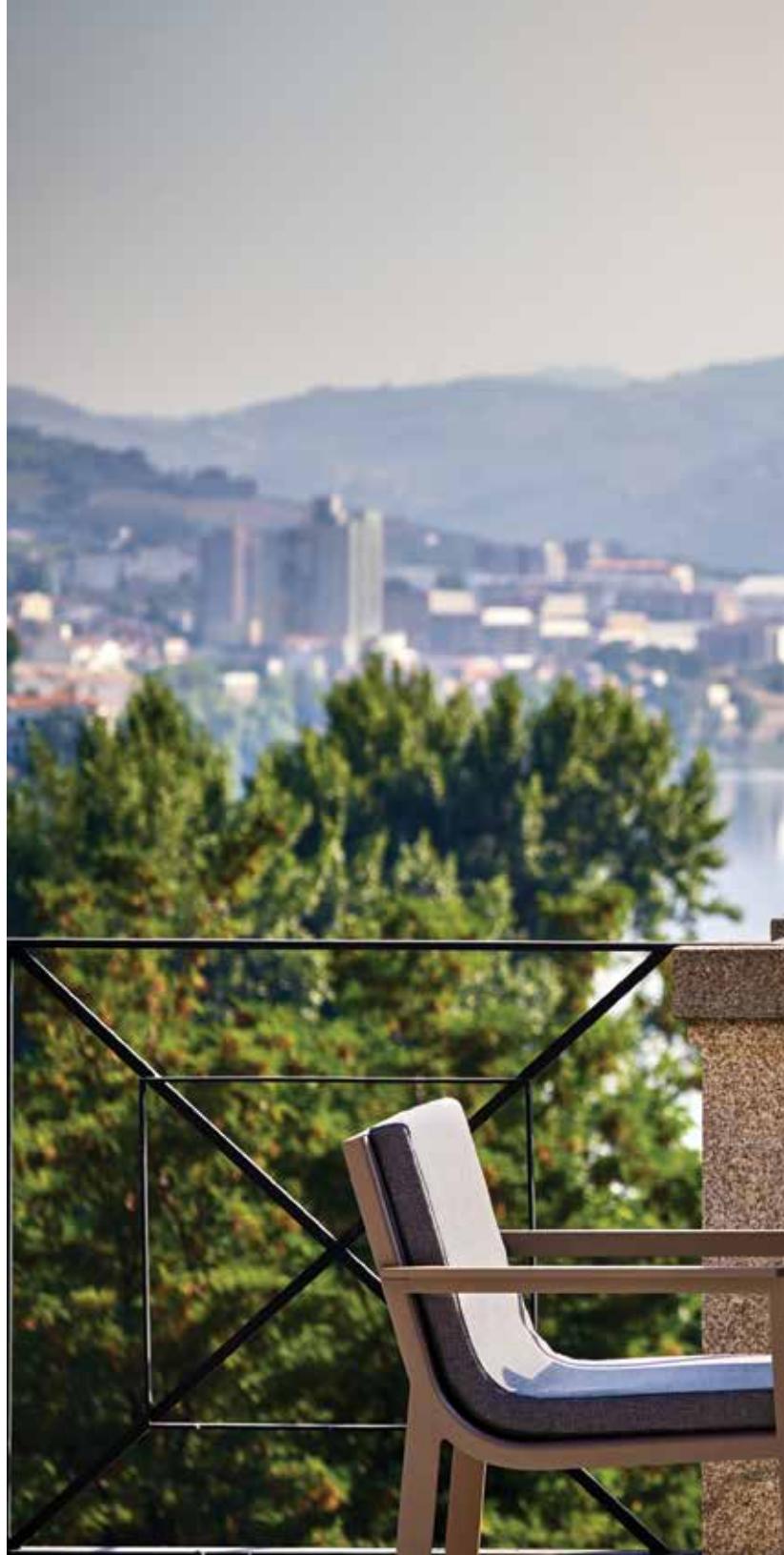
We have reduced our print advertising budget to virtually zero and focused almost exclusively on social media and other digital storytelling. When you first



open a hotel and have a unique product, the most powerful lever you have is the press. Be nice to journalists and make sure you spend time with them. Make sure they experience all the great things you have to offer. Have a dedicated team to look after social media, too, and make sure the leadership team is actively supporting these efforts.

### **MOST VALUABLE COMMODITY**

In a world where time is the most valuable commodity, the role of the concierge will only increase. At Six Senses Douro Valley, we can hire a helicopter to take guests up the river to a magical winery closed to the public. There, they will have lunch with the family, visit their wild and beautiful property, cross a river in a 4x4, and visit a 25,000-year-old Neolithic World Heritage site. Only a great concierge can organize this.







# Patrizio Cipollini

**GENERAL MANAGER,  
FOUR SEASONS HOTEL  
(FLORENCE, ITALY)**

**BORN IN:**

Pieve Fosciana, Italy

**SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:**

Italy, Germany, United Kingdom,  
Switzerland, Australia

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:**

40

*Photos Courtesy of Four Seasons Hotel Florence*



**“Respecting your team means listening to them, including them in decision-making, asking for their advice and insight, and rewarding them for going above and beyond.”**

### **GROWING UP**

I grew up in a small village in the Tuscany countryside in Italy to very loving parents. My mother has always been a very strong woman. Together with my father, they educated me about discipline and self-expression, and these values still influence me today. The most important lesson they taught me was to respect all people. At the age of fifteen, I started studying hospitality and began working in the tourism industry. My first job was as a dishwasher in Versilia on the Tuscan coast. The main allure of the industry was that every day was different, and I could meet new people and learn about different cultures.

### **IMPORTANCE OF EXPOSURE**

Early on in my career I experienced many humble jobs in hospitality and learned exactly how grueling

they could be. This instilled in me the empathy and compassion required to truly acknowledge, appreciate, and respect all staff serving in those positions. In doing the work myself and working my way up, I now know exactly how much time you need to prepare a martini or to clean a pile of dishes, and this insight makes me more aware for when I ask my employees to do something. I believe all managers should expose themselves to as many roles as possible so that they too can support their colleagues in a meaningful and substantive way when needed.

### **A TRUE TEAM EFFORT**

When I was promoted to restaurant manager for the first time, I took on a new set of responsibilities and began directing my team. One of the most important lessons I learned back then was to reinforce the fact that we either succeed or fail as a team. Only when



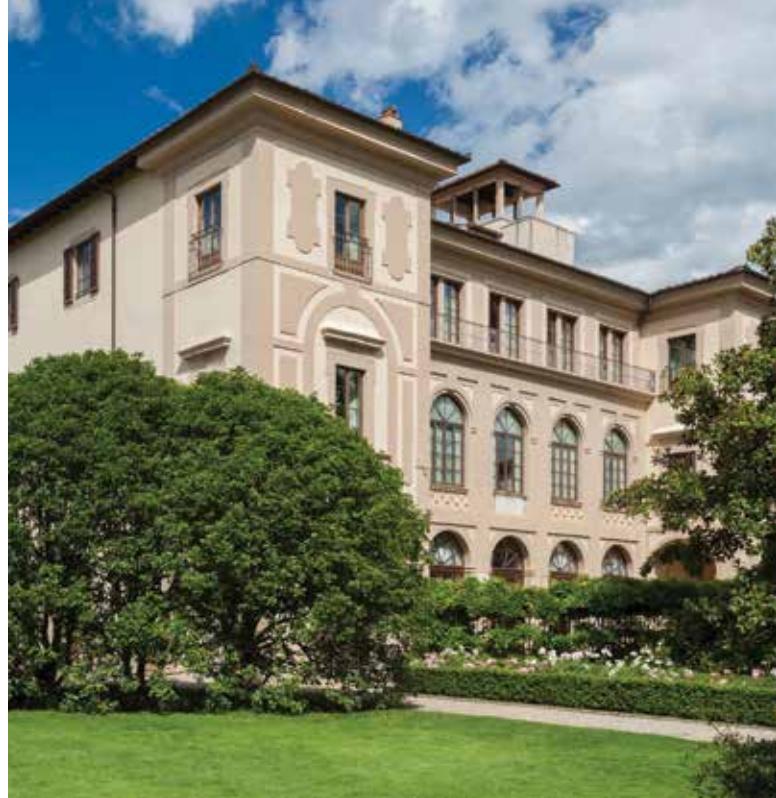
we all contribute and take ownership of our roles will we come out ahead. We all had a role to play. To keep the team motivated and engaged, I also celebrated successes as a team, too. That combination has since been my philosophy for many years.

### **THERE WAS NO INTERNET**

When I became sales director for the Ciga Hotel in Costa Smeralda, Italy, I traveled a lot. It was 1988, and there was no Internet, email, or mobile phones. We had to meet people directly and secure their business. This experience taught me a lot about dealing with clients and the importance of building relationships. Still today, in our hyper-connected world, it is extremely important to personally interact with guests.

### **CREATING A BALANCE**

Over the years, I've realized that guests are happy if they feel recognized and acknowledged. In other words, they want to know that we're listening and paying attention to them. Someone once told me that I have an innate capacity to extend paternal warmth to the entire team. I believe this attitude sets the tone of the hotel as one of friendship and welcoming service. This also helps to balance the grandeur that





greets guests inside the hotel. This balance is fundamental. We don't want people to feel overwhelmed by this historical palazzo; we want them to feel at home. This is why our staff work really hard to create a warm, friendly, inviting, and respectful atmosphere.

### THE DOMINO EFFECT

One of the most valuable leadership lessons I've learned is the importance of building a culture of respect. Respecting your team means listening to them, including them in making decisions, asking for their advice and insight, and rewarding them for going above and beyond. If you respect and empathize with your staff, they in turn will do the same with guests. Paying attention to people is a Four Seasons hallmark, and ultimately if employees are happy, they will ensure that guests are happy too.



## SHARING IN SUCCESS

Staff members are motivated when they feel as though they contributed to and were part of a successful project. This is why we always share our goals with all staff and get them involved in personalizing the guest experience. We also share financial results of the hotel every year, while each department shares more granular data with their team year-round. We share in our successes and reward colleagues who have shown exceptional service.

## A TRAINING GROUND

Many colleagues who have grown up with me have moved to other Four Seasons hotels and resorts all over the world and have been promoted to very senior positions. It is bittersweet when a staff member decides to move elsewhere to try a new location and experience, but I am very proud of them and am glad that their time with us was valued and recognized as they advanced professionally. We must plan for this eventuality by ensuring we have a strong pipeline of talent ready to be empowered to take on additional responsibilities.

## TRENDSETTERS

One of the biggest challenges to leading a luxury hotel is seeing the big picture of the marketplace of competitors at the local level and the corporate level. We're always monitoring them as best we can, looking for ways to improve our own services and offerings. One of the ways we tackle this challenge is by organizing leadership meetings between many Four Seasons properties to share ideas and insights. This allows us to grow and learn as a collective. Having said that, an inspiring idea to better serve our guests doesn't necessarily come from our competitors. An idea might come to me while sipping coffee in the center of Florence. I must say, however, that most of the time, we are the trendsetters.

## A LIVING MUSEUM

We are in the Cradle of the Renaissance, and we know that our guests are looking for local experiences. We are very lucky on this point because the hotel is made of a 15<sup>th</sup>-century Palazzo and a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Villa. In other words, it is a living museum. To celebrate the history and quality of Florentine manufacturers, one of the more unique offerings inside the hotel is the possibility of having your shoes tailor-made.

## AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES

Our concierge team has crafted a wide variety of unique itineraries to experience the city and neighborhood like a local. For example, if guests are interested in craftsmanship, an itinerary can be proposed based on Florence's best artisans. If they are car lovers, a vintage car and tasting tour in the Chianti wine region can be arranged. If they love the sea, we can get them to the Cinque Terre by car, boat, or even helicopter. If they love romantic dinners, we offer a unique experience on Ponte Vecchio, where we secured exclusive access to the bridge's only open-air terrace, tucked above the glittering jewelry boutique of Dante Cardini. There you can have a four-course gourmet meal, prepared on-site and designed by Michelin-starred chef Vito Mollica. Anything is possible.





# Pedro Dias

GENERAL MANAGER,  
THE SURREY  
(NEW YORK, UNITED STATES)

BORN IN:  
Lagos, Portugal

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:  
United States, Portugal, Germany

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:  
38

**“I tell my team that if they want to become a general manager, then they need to think like one today and act like one today. That’s the best way to exercise your brain in pursuit of higher goals. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up on the coastline region of Algarve in southern Portugal, one of the most active tourist destinations for Northern Europeans. When I was young, I would always be outdoors enjoying the beach or in the water snorkeling, surfing, diving, or swimming. My grandparents were farmers. They taught me the value of hard work and the spirit of sacrifice. My favorite activities were escaping to the middle of their fruit orchards and running around with cattle. My mother raised us and took great care of the family. My father was in the hospitality business. He joined the luxury hotel industry at age eighteen and retired as a general manager. He inspired me to embrace this career early on. The diversity of tourists visiting our region also intrigued me. Interacting with people from different cultures and wanting to learn different languages lured me in even further.

#### **STARTING EARLY**

When I was fifteen, my father launched his own fine-dining restaurant. The day our doors opened, we were the only two servers. At the time, I knew nothing about waiting tables, but with him as a guide and mentor, I built a strong foundation in understanding the business of hospitality. I learned about customer service, food and beverage, and operating the business. All through high school I would work at the restaurant, including breaks. At age seventeen, I was entrusted at times to run the restaurant myself. Until I officially started my career after college, I never stopped working in hospitality. I did virtually every job there is, to further gain experience and rise through the ranks.

PLEIADES

Nº 20



## DETAILS MATTER

The main lessons I learned when working at my father's fine-dining restaurant was the importance of paying attention to even the minutest of details. They make all the difference, and they conveyed to our guests that we genuinely cared about them, their experience, and their comfort.

## CASTING CALL

Because of my father's background in luxury hospitality, I was always exposed to many luxury hotels. With all the glitz and glamor, to me such hotels were a magical place. It looked like a masterful play, with staff putting on a show for the guests, where the hotel itself was the stage. It all felt surreal, and I wanted to play a part in that extravagant production.

## ABLE TO RELATE

Building my career from the ground up was extremely important. It ultimately made me a better general manager because I can speak to any of my colleagues with full knowledge of how things get done. It also makes me appreciate them much more. My team, too, appreciates the fact that I can relate to their positions in a meaningful way. From a management lens, knowing the operational intricacies is also helpful when dealing with challenges or setting strategy.

## **ADAPTABLE AND FLEXIBLE**

My first leadership position in the industry, which came after college, was as an assistant director of rooms. I learned that you can never approach challenges with a one-size-fits-all mentality. Every challenge, guest, and day are different. In that context, never take anything for granted and do not make

decisions without gathering all the facts from all perspectives.

## **CULTURAL ELEMENTS**

Mutual respect, genuine care, positivity, and appreciation are the most important aspects of a culture



poised for success. In addition, colleagues are looking to you to lead by example, as the tone is set from the top. I've found that one of the most effective ways of creating this culture is by regularly walking the floor. Check on associates, listen to them, support them, relate to them, and ask about their families. Treat them like people, not workers.

### **AN EMPOWERED WORKFORCE**

Through continuous learning, training, coaching, and mentoring, an empowered workforce can be critical to success. Empowering staff to make decisions eliminates the need to escalate issues to "higher management" in a time-consuming, unnecessary way. This will create a much more streamlined and effective operation.

### **NON-TRADITIONAL INTERVIEWS**

When hiring new recruits, I tend to stay away from the typical interview model, which often catches applicants by surprise. At first, I'll ask about what motivates them, what makes them smile, what bothers them, and what their hobbies or passions are outside of work. Through these questions, I'm trying to get to their nature, rather than rehearsed answers. I then ask about their professional journey, and for stories

about challenges they overcame, how they motivate their teams, what they appreciate in a leader, and who they look up to and why.

### **THINK LIKE A GM**

It's important that colleagues understand your own professional story and path to leadership. I truly believe that we all have what it takes to reach our potential, and I try to make everyone feel as though their success and growth has no limits. I tell my team that if they want to become a general manager, then they need to think like one and act like one. That's the best way to exercise your brain in pursuit of higher goals. I also tell them that they have no bigger supporter if they wish to rise through the ranks.

### **MANAGING EXPECTATIONS**

A career in this business demands a passion for serving others. This is an industry of long hours and long days where you're managing a wide range of expectations on a regular basis—guests, colleagues, bosses, investors, friends, and family. One of the ways to manage such a diverse group of people is to develop a discipline of prioritization. But ultimately, if you don't truly love what you do, you will not be successful.



## ART EXHIBITS

Today's travelers are looking to learn about the world, so integrating a location's culture and history into the guest experience is critical to success. A cookie-cutter approach to design, décor, and service offerings no longer applies. The Surrey is within a neighborhood that caters to the art world, with several galleries and museums nearby. One of the ways we blended this local scene into the hotel was to activate our public spaces with rotating art installations. We partnered with a local curator and host seasonal exhibits inside

the hotel. This makes for a dynamic guest experience while also creating news media opportunities.

## A POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP

One of the most successful partnerships and marketing campaigns I've been a part of was forged during my time at the St. Regis New York. We partnered with Bentley Motors to create the world's only car-branded suite. It was tremendously successful and resulted in a plethora of public relations events,



cross-marketing opportunities, and media coverage. This translated into immediate demand. Ultimately, the ROI was achieved in a very short period of time. Today, the St. Regis New York has a number of designer suites, including the Dior Suite, Tiffany Suite, Milano Suite, and Bentley Suite.

### THE TRIP PERSONA

When lecturing New York University students on customer relationship management, one of the points

I make is that possessing a database of intelligence about your customers does not automatically translate into delivering an anticipatory experience. This is because the same guest will have different needs and wants depending on the nature or purpose of each one of their travels, known as the *trip persona*. Knowing the newspaper, beverage, bed, and other room preferences allows you to set a better stage for each guest's experience. But that alone will not suffice if each time a regular guest stays with us, their travel purpose has nuances that will be unique to each travel plan.

Engaging with guests in a genuine and caring way is what opens the door to pieces of information that are unique to that specific travel event. We can cater to those insights proactively if the right mind-set and attitude are used by every team member at every guest interaction.

### **BEING IN CONTROL VS. BEING PAMPERED**

As a luxury hotel industry, we are transitioning from pampering guests in a classic, white-glove sense, to one where guests being in full control of their experience is the new luxury. While the expectation of basic quality remains true for both older generations and millennial travelers—a very good bed in a comfortable setting—the reality is that the very definition of luxury has evolved.

A phone by the bedside is no longer necessary. Slippers, robes, a doorman, and someone to assist them with their luggage are less important. More important offerings include a high focus on technology—ample USB and power sockets near the bed and sitting area. The configuration of public spaces have also become increasingly important social hubs as guests look to spend less time in their rooms. Fine dining, too, has evolved. It is no longer about tablecloths, silver, and three sets of glassware. It is more about the gastronomic journey that connects them to

the location in a highly social atmosphere. Jacket and tie requirements are also gone. The new dress code is casual at all times, allowing guests to showcase their own unique style. In other words, the crowd is now setting the tone of the atmosphere and space of fine dining and luxury hotels, not the other way around.

### **AN INDUSTRY CHALLENGE**

With the definition of luxury changing from classical to casual chic, newer, lifestyle boutique hotels are likely to be more successful than traditional luxury hotels. Therefore, older properties of this caliber will have to make investments to catch up with this new era's minimalistic but high-tech requirements, all the while maintaining their current base of guests.





# Peter Hopgood

GENERAL MANAGER,  
OUTRIGGER FIJI BEACH RESORT  
(FIJI)

BORN IN:

Toowoomba, Australia

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Fiji, Australia, Greece, Canada

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

37

**“Transitioning from follower to leader is a make or break moment for many people. They struggle giving direction to others, and are either too harsh or too soft. Being firm but fair is the secret balance. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up on the Gold Coast in Australia, and all I ever wanted to do was surf. I was a member of the North End Board Riders and we won several national competitions. Our lifestyle growing up was tied to the water. If we weren't surfing, we would be fishing, diving, and swimming. When I was young, however, I lived on a farm. I got out of bed at four every morning to chop wood, milk the cows, and complete all my chores before heading to school. My mother was a very caring special-needs teacher, and my father was a tough-minded businessman who owned a trucking company.

#### **AN OPEN DOOR POLICY**

Our family philosophy growing up was that the door was always open. We regularly hosted exchange students from all over the world, and anyone needing a meal or a bed could always come around the Hopgood household. If you didn't have anywhere to go for Christmas, you were more than welcome to celebrate with us. Over the years, we had visitors from Canada, Japan, and Papa New Guinea stay at our home. I truly believe that the interaction I had with these guests fueled my desire to travel and experience other cultures. In that sense, I was quite fortunate to visit Japan as an exchange student when I was only sixteen. That experience inspired me to travel more.



## **FROM THE GROUND UP**

My first job in this industry was as a pot scrubber. My second job was a public area cleaner. I learned first-hand what these jobs entailed and how challenging they were to undertake day in and day out. I believe this lesson has been invaluable to my leadership and management style. I have undertaken every role in the hotel industry myself as I rose through the ranks, enabling me to be a strong but compassionate leader.

## **A PIONEER, A MENTOR**

Over the years, I've been fortunate to have worked with some of the true pioneers of tourism in Australia. A gentleman named Keith Williams, who built Sea World and Hamilton Island, was my most influential mentor. He taught me never to compromise standards and how to build an incredible relationship with your team. He taught me how to identify all of the small things that convert a good holiday into a great holiday. I admired his courage and tenacity in building resorts and theme parks from scratch.

## **MAKE OR BREAK**

My first leadership role in the industry was as a beverage manager at Daydream Island Resort. The transition from line staff to manager was daunting. You

need to have the ability to lead and direct teams, deliver a wonderful guest experience, and stay on budget. Transitioning from follower to leader is a pivotal moment for many people. They struggle giving direction to others, and are either too harsh or too soft. Being firm but fair is the secret balance.

## **A SIMPLE SURVEY**

When I start working at a new resort, I undertake a very simple survey. I ask staff what are the five best and five worst things about working at their hotel. Immediately, you get feedback that allows you to understand what your staff are thinking, what issues they care about most, and where you should put your energy as a leader to alleviating bottlenecks to success. If you can positively address a number of issues that arise during this process, you will instantly earn their respect and trust. Making sure your staff is happy should be your number one priority. Staff contentment will flow to the guest experience. Similarly, the feeling and attitude of an unhappy staff will also flow to the guest experience.

## **A SHIFT IN MANAGEMENT STYLE**

At first, I was quite an autocratic leader. But this style of leadership was challenged head on when I attend-



ed a three-day Franklin Covey course titled “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.” After attending this course, I became far more engaging, understanding, and inclusive. It was a real game changer for me. I became a far more effective general manager.

### APPRECIATE YOUR TEAM

It is important to share all positive feedback you receive from guests to your team, particularly with

those staff mentioned. A simple acknowledgement is all that's required. Staff that are constantly praised by guests and others should be employees of the month and be recognized more publically. Indeed, we make special note of all staff mentioned in reviews online, which helps us identify whom to recognize. Valuing your team's hard work, commitment, and contribution is one of the cornerstones of leadership.



## A PASSION FOR PEOPLE

Hospitality is all about people. Therefore, when hiring new colleagues, you need people that love entertaining and telling stories, and are incredibly passionate about ensuring that guests are having an enjoyable time. Fijians are naturally hospitable. They are warm and engaging, and love interacting with guests.

## THE FIRST DAY

Similar to our guests, we want our new staff to feel that they are part of a large family. I always make sure that I meet all new recruits on their first day of work. I explain to them that it is my role to look after them and to take care of them. I also advise them that my door is always open should they wish to speak to me for any reason. Every role is valuable and necessary, and collectively it's our goal to ensure each and every guest has a wonderful experience at our resort.



## HONESTY AND TRANSPARENCY

It is very important to share the results of your hotel operations with your team. Every quarter, I meet with my staff of 600 to discuss the financial results of the resort and the challenges we may be facing, as well as to solicit their feedback on how best to address those challenges. By providing the financial results, staff are given a solid perspective of how the business is doing and why some decisions need to be made, particularly if you have to cut costs. More generally, including staff input into key operational and strate-

gic decisions shows them that their opinion is valuable and important. This empowerment will translate into employees taking a positive and proactive role in continually improving the guest experience.

## TRAINING GROUND

To encourage internal promotions and to give staff at all levels the opportunity to progress, any vacancy that becomes available is first advertised internally. For professional development, we provide regular



training programs through the buddy system, where senior staff show junior team members how to undertake different tasks and also to teach them new skills.

For senior managers, we bring in trainers from overseas. As an example, this could take the form of Franklin Covey leadership courses. In addition, we train our butlers and fine-dine service staff at the Australian Butler School. These efforts cost a lot of money but have proven to be well worth it. I believe we have the best management team of any resort in Fiji and our butlers and fine dining staff are second to none. Our

fine dining restaurant Ivi was awarded best restaurant in the country at the 2017 Fiji tourism awards.

### THE LOCAL EXPERIENCE

Architecturally, it is important that your resort embraces the local culture. For example, we have traditional Fijian Bures at our resort. We entertain our guests with traditional Fijian feasts, dancing, kava ceremonies, and fire walking demonstrations. We then provide guests the opportunity to immerse

themselves in the culture. This may include helping build a classroom for kids, touring a local village, or attending a church service on Sunday. We also have three troupes of serenaders who can sing both traditional and celebratory songs for special occasions.

### GIVING BACK

Our community tourism projects to give back to the local area are very popular on Facebook and Twitter. Once guests have engaged in such projects, they want to come back to see how things have progressed, and if that isn't possible, they very much enjoy updates on their efforts through social media.

### THE WEDDING PACKAGE

One of our most successful campaigns that has had a long-term effect on the resort was in 2010 when we created a simple wedding package. It was all inclusive of the wedding ceremony, reception, priest, photography, hair, makeup, and florist. We did forty weddings that year. And just three years later, we did 265. Interest has not waivered since. The package was incredibly successful.







# Philip Barnes

REGIONAL VICE PRESIDENT  
AND MANAGING DIRECTOR,  
THE SAVOY HOTEL  
(LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM)

BORN IN: Salford, United Kingdom

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

United Kingdom, Canada, United  
Arab Emirates, Singapore, New  
Zealand, Australia, United States

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

40

*Photo on Left Courtesy of Red Photographic for The Savoy Hotel  
Photos Courtesy of The Savoy Hotel*



**“As the general manager, you set the tone for everything that goes on at your hotel. If you walk by a problem, then you are the problem. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I was born in Salford in Greater Manchester in the UK to parents who were both teachers. I had a relatively humble start to life. We moved to Sussex in the South of England when I was about eleven as a result of my sister being an asthmatic. My father was a headmaster and my mother taught English. My mother introduced me to theatre, poetry, and literature. They both taught me a set of values that I carry with me today—honesty, integrity, and respect for all people.

The teachers I had at boarding school also had a great influence on me. My house master was a Benedictine monk who is still a friend of mine. This was the 1960s, and he was in the midst of navigating great change to the religious order. The year I started Catholic boarding school, you were supposed to go to church three times a week. By the second year, you only had to

go on Sunday. The leadership realized that the more they pushed for attendance, the more it would drive people away. In other words, create an enabling environment for people to participate and succeed, rather than telling them what to do.

#### **A DIFFERENT WORLD**

My parents didn't really understand me going into the hotel business. They had no idea what I did, the roles I had, or what the business was about. The industry was alien to their background. They had never stayed in luxury hotels. Rather, they would rent cottages for family holidays or go to a bed and breakfast. It just wouldn't have crossed their minds. Until I became general manager of a Four Seasons hotel, my mother thought I was going to be a waiter.

# SAVOY

GYPSY ⭐⭐⭐⭐

## THE FIRST SPARK

We used to live near Gatwick Airport and so my first job in the industry was for an airline catering company. While in boarding school, I would spend every summer working in the kitchen, preparing meals for the airlines. I peeled thousands of eggs and made thousands of sandwiches. It was very hard work, but it sparked an interest in travel and hospitality.

## JACK OF ALL TRADES

My last summer job was in a hotel that had just opened in a village near where we lived. I joined the team as a general assistant doing split-shifts every day for six days a week. Every morning I cleared out all the bars, took out all the empties, and restocked. I would put all of the recyclable bottles back in the crates so they could be taken away. I would do all the ordering of replacement beers, wines, and spirits to make sure that the cellars were properly stocked. I would cover for the bartenders while they took their meal breaks. In the afternoon I would be involved with setting up rooms or breaking down rooms in the banquet hall. In the evening I would be cashiering, answering telephones, and helping out in the restaurants. I was on the frontlines every day and would always learn something different and be involved in something new.

Back then, for example, everything was done by hand. You were writing out bills for guests in the restaurant and balancing them out on a spread sheet. At the end of the day, you'd have to use a calculator to make sure that the entire sheet balanced out. With such a high level of responsibility came accountability, and I learned that attention to detail was what really mattered in the business.

## A NEVER-ENDING PROCESS

To build a great team culture, you must start with transparency and alignment. When you build off those ideas, you get into issues of empowerment and ownership, and giving people the authority to do what needs to be done. Everybody must also have the same level of commitment in taking care of a guest, collectively working towards a common goal. There's no secret to getting it right. It is a continuous, never-ending process to reinforce core values, align on core objectives, and ensure staff are empowered to make decisions of consequence.

## THE COMPLETE PACKAGE

When weighing literal cost versus benefit, do not base decisions solely on price. It's not about sourcing the cheapest product or even the most expensive product.



It's about looking at the complete package in order to make the right decisions with a view to the future. For example, if you know you need to make a change to televisions in a hotel over the next three years, ask yourself: What is the product that I need, and what is the future need of the guest going to be? What is it that people are going to be using televisions for in three years' time? Don't automatically lean towards

the most cost-effective solution. Address the current need but also take time assessing the future need.

### YOU SET THE TONE

As the general manager, you set the tone for everything that goes on. If you walk by a problem, then you are the problem. You have to address it and realize



that everyone looks to you as a leader. They see everything you do and how you do it. When I stay in my hotel, it's like being stalked by 600 people. Everybody knows when I go for breakfast, what I have for breakfast, when I go to the gym, and who I'm having dinner with. That's the kind of scrutiny you are under as a leader, and if you don't like that, then you're in the wrong role.

### BEING THE MENTEE

When I was general manager of the Shangri-La in Singapore, I reported to Goh Soo Siah, chairman of the board. He had a background in property development—not hotels. I learned a lot from him about the business side of the industry given his unique vantage point. A great mentor is someone who doesn't just

help you professionally, but also helps you personally. They genuinely care about you and your future. And that doesn't stop when you stop working with them. When you move onwards, it's important to maintain that relationship.

## BEING THE MENTOR

When the tables turn, and you become the mentor to others, you're imparting knowledge and insight, steering colleagues in the right direction. I can think of around a dozen people in this company who would undoubtedly describe me as their mentor. They are extremely important to me, and not just because I've worked with them. I've watched them grow and develop, and they've become great friends over the years.

## PASSION AND ENTHUSIASM

We're not in the business of saving lives, nor are we trying to put a man on the moon. We're trying to look after guests in the best possible way, and the one thing we can't teach is the right attitude. If they have the presence, manners, and wherewithal, we can teach them pretty much anything else. Of course, there are positions that require a specific skillset such as engineering, accounting, and culinary chops. However,

outside of those professions, passion and enthusiasm is more important than experience.

## FULL RESPONSIBILITY

The whole idea of colleague motivation comes down to hiring the right people, training them appropriately, and then giving them full responsibility for what they do. As a baseline, they are already motivated to succeed. They are also motivated when they see results. All you need to do is value, appreciate, and recognize their efforts. One of the struggles leaders have with giving their colleagues full responsibilities is the risk that comes with such empowerment. But in the thirty years since I first became a general manager, I've only had to question one individual about a decision they made to ensure a guest left happy. Just one. If you hire the right people and train them properly, they will do the right thing.

## THE NUMBER ONE CHALLENGE

Without question, the number one challenge to leading a luxury hotel is recruiting and managing people. If the team isn't aligned, if the team doesn't have a common goal, if the team doesn't challenge itself, that's where it all comes unstuck. Having the right people around you and putting them in the right positions is critical. You can have the most beautiful







hotel in the world or you can have the ugliest hotel in the world. If you have the right people, you can make an ugly hotel successful. At the same time, a beautiful hotel with the wrong people will fail.

### AUTHENTIC HERITAGE

Creating an authentic experience is crucial to our business, particularly somewhere as iconic as The Savoy. This hotel is synonymous with London and with quintessential British hospitality. Guests seek out this authenticity. Furthermore, the luxury hotel business is about providing an experience. None of our guests come to the hotel simply to sleep. They come to be part of London, and we must constantly evolve with the city to ensure that we are providing that experience. Our great advantage is authentic heritage, and authenticity will always win.

### PEOPLE CHANGE

One of the dangers of personalization is that a guest history only tells you a snapshot of time. It doesn't tell you where they are today, so you have to regularly validate certain information that you have about your guest. People's habits change, their dietary requirements change, their interests evolve. You have to make an effort to understand who you're dealing with in the here and now.



# Pinar Kartal Timer

GENERAL MANAGER,  
PERA PALACE HOTEL JUMEIRAH  
(ISTANBUL, TURKEY)

*Recently appointed General Manager of Jumeirah  
Al Qasrand Dar Al Masyaf in Dubai,  
United Arab Emirates*

BORN IN: Istanbul, Turkey

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Turkey

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

30

**“The definition of luxury has changed in recent times. It no longer symbolizes anything material. Today, luxury is the knowledge of hidden places and experiences in any given city, and authentic experiences that simply cannot be organized on your own. ”**

#### GROWING UP

I was born in Istanbul, Turkey, to a big, loving family. When I was quite young, I split my time between Anatolia, where my parents and I lived, and Istanbul, where my grandparents lived. We lived in a very humble setting, while my grandparents lived luxuriously. I learned to adapt and appreciate two extremely different environments. My father was a military officer with a soft heart. He taught me the importance of honesty, integrity, fairness, and standing up for the rights of others. My mother took care of the family. She was a perfectionist, making sure we had the healthiest food, the best education, and the finest outfits.

#### HUMAN ERROR

My first job in hospitality was as a reservation clerk at the Hilton International Istanbul. At the time, reservations were coming through over telex and fax, not streamlined via the Internet and managed with sophisticated software. I was filing all such correspondence and by accident I labeled a guest arrival date 11/05 instead of 05/11. When the guest arrived, we couldn't find their reservation. They also claimed that they had booked an upgraded room for the same rate. We couldn't verify this but ended up accepting their word. We looked unprofessional, lost the opportunity to upsell, and my shift leader was extremely





upset. I learned that even in my very junior position, a small mistake could lead to a major issue.

### **ROLL UP YOUR SLEEVES**

My first leadership position was as a group sales manager. Although I only had one colleague reporting to me, I was in charge of the group's performance, ensuring that all departments involved were performing optimally. On one occasion, we had confirmed a block of rooms with seaside view. As a reminder, in 1990, there were no electronic key cards. We had heavy keys. In double-checking the keys and envelopes of this group, I noticed the room numbers were facing the garden—not the seaside. The reservation agent had made a mistake, and we only had one hour before everyone arrived. I immediately went to help housekeeping clean up and re-arrange all the sea view rooms. In rolling up my sleeves to get the job done, I earned the respect and trust of my team. However, I also realized that while you can delegate duties, you cannot delegate ultimate responsibility.

### **THE CORE OF CULTURE**

Respect is the bedrock of a successful working environment. Respect for yourself and your duties, respect for your colleagues and their positions, and respect



for your clients and guests. Notions of hard work, empathy, honesty, collaboration, empowerment, and joy flow once respect is established. Communication, too, is vital to a healthy operation. I always encourage my colleagues to seek me out for face-to-face interactions, as this continuously builds rapport.

### INTERACTING WITH GUESTS

Guests should be made to feel welcomed, appreciated, and acknowledged. Hotel employees should be friendly but not pally, assertive but not rude, kind but not weak, humble but not timid, and proud but not arrogant.



### SEEK EXCELLENCE, PATIENTLY

As a perfectionist, good is never enough. It's not enough for me and it's not enough for the luxury hotel business. We must always strive for excellence, building on our strengths and narrowing our weaknesses. At the same time, we need to appreciate how hard our team is working, spend time motivating them to reach new heights, and give them time to improve. Continuous learning and development will not happen overnight.

## **ATTITUDE, NOT SKILLS**

After interviews with human resources and the department head, I take the opportunity to speak with each new applicant, regardless of the position they're applying for. While I can't judge whether they're a good electrician or housekeeper in twenty minutes, I can judge whether this person is suitable for our hotel family. I have no hesitation saying that I recruit for attitude over skills. We can teach virtually every skill, but changing an attitude can take years, if ever.

## **THE FULL PICTURE**

When new recruits join the team, we have a full day of training, which involves meeting and hearing from all department heads personally about what their duties are and how they relate to other units, followed by detailed house tours and safety guidance. New department heads spend a week rotating as guests of other units to understand each operation individually and in relation to others. This immersive experience is critical to starting off on the right foot. If you don't have the full picture, you can't make the most effective decisions.





## BUILDING COMMITMENT

There are several strategies to keep your team motivated, engaged, and committed. Fundamentally, you must appreciate, recognize, and respect them. Sometimes just saying “thank you” can go a long way. Be open to their feedback and be inclusive in your overall decision-making process. This will create commitment to and ownership of the hotel’s success. Similarly, opportunities for professional devel-

opment are critical to ensuring guests are motivated. We also organize team activities to have some fun and to build camaraderie outside the hotel, including group dinners and bowling tournaments.

## ROOM TO GROW

Every team member is different. They could have different aspirations, motivations, or long-term plans for the future. What’s important is that you tailor a

professional development program for them based on their needs and interests. For example, our reservation supervisor had the interest and potential to become a revenue manager. To better understand that side of the business, he was given the opportunity to work with the current manager and attend budget meetings to learn more about what that position entailed. In addition, we offer a variety of cross-exposure opportunities in other Jumeirah hotels.

### **AN AUTHENTIC, LOCAL EXPERIENCE**

One of the ways in which we try to differentiate ourselves in a competitive market is by moving beyond being the most historical luxury hotel. Every month, we host a famous writer for a literary gathering, and for the past three years we have hosted classical music concerts every Saturday morning. In addition, we had a special interactive theatre play written and performed exclusively for the hotel, turning the property into a stage. The show has been offered for many months, running twice a week, and tickets are always sold out.

In addition, we created Black Week Istanbul, an international crime writers' festival. Our first event was held in 2014 on the occasion of Agatha Christie's 125<sup>th</sup> birthday, at which her grandchild participated. To celebrate even further, just prior to the festival, we

partnered with Belmond Cipriani Hotel Venice and the Orient Express to organize a whodunit themed dinner in Venice. The second festival was held in 2014 and was organized in honor of George Simonen. And in 2017, the event will take the theme of James Bond, due to Ian Fleming. Needless to say, all of these incredible writers were guests of Pera Palace Hotel Jumeirah.

### **MEETING EXPECTATIONS**

To ensure the highest guest satisfaction, we conduct frequent audits and training. Twice a year, a third-party, private company audits our efforts. Four times a year we conduct our own internal audits. And another four times a year we organize a refresh in training for different levels of staff.

### **LOVE IT OR HATE IT**

If you don't mind working 24/7, a career in luxury hospitality is incredibly rewarding. You will have the chance to meet the most important people in the world. You will have friends from all over the world. You will have a chance to travel and see the world in a way few people can. This is an industry that you either love or hate, and you must absolutely love it in order to be successful.

## A WARM WELCOME

We welcome every guest with a glass of apple tea served with a Turkish delight and a hot or cold towel, depending on the weather. Guests are then escorted to their rooms in the first electric elevator in Turkey while a guest relations executive explains the history of the hotel. In the room, guests are treated with seasonal dates or a very special chocolate bar from the neighborhood. As the hotel is a living museum, all of the historical furniture, rare books on display, and the Ataturk Museum Room transport guests to 1920s Turkey.

## A CHANGING DEFINITION

The definition of luxury has changed in recent times. It no longer symbolizes anything material. Today, luxury is the knowledge of hidden places and experiences in any given city, and authentic experiences that simply cannot be organized on your own. Therefore, tailored services provided by an expert concierge play an even more important role today than in the past. Across the industry, experiential adventures are also in demand, such as cooking with a celebrity chef, truffle hunting, and deep-sea fishing.

## A TRULY PERSONALIZED STAY

Knowing more and more about your guests enables increased personalization, which is the future of the industry. Even if a guest doesn't share their interests or preferences in advance, we are becoming experts in sleuthing some of that information online. A welcome amenity would then be based on their profession.

For example, a writer might receive a box of chocolates with their latest novel cover printed on top, and a musician might receive a plate of treats in the form of a treble clef. For regular guests, we offer special amenities and services on their 5<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> stay, from complimentary transfers to a private cooking lesson with our executive chef.





# Ralph Radtke

**REGIONAL DIRECTOR,  
KEMPINSKI RESIDENCES (TURKEY)**

**GENERAL MANAGER,  
CIRAGAN PALACE KEMPINSKI  
(ISTANBUL, TURKEY)**

**AREA DIRECTOR,  
KEMPINSKI HOTELS (ITALY)**

**BORN IN:** Berlin, Germany

**SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:**

Turkey, France, Thailand, Russia,  
Cote d'Ivoire, Luxembourg, Israel,  
Ukraine, Germany, Austria, Italy

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY: 45**

*Photos Courtesy of Ciragan Palace Kempinski*

**“Leaders who pay attention to their employees’ feedback, concerns, and opinions have relationships with their colleagues rooted in trust and respect. That kind of relationship fosters a sense of loyalty and commitment. ”**

#### GROWING UP

I was born in Berlin to hardworking parents who owned one of the biggest textile factories in Germany and in all of Europe. As a child, I traveled a lot with my family and was fortunate to experience a variety of luxury hotels. Indeed, my father’s passion for cars, food, and travel rubbed off on me. And because he regularly hosted soirees and events, I grew up socializing and meeting new people. This love for traveling the world, meeting new people from all walks of life, and discovering new cultures and traditions steered me into the hospitality business.

#### STARTING OUT

In 1972, at the age of twenty, I secured my first permanent job in the industry as a room service waiter and cashier at Le Bristol in Paris. After some time there, I decided to pursue additional studies in hotel management and food and beverage, graduating from Glion Hotel School in Switzerland. While in school, I completed two trainings at Hotel Cipriani in Venice. I first served as *chef de rang*, and then as assistant manager of the restaurant. After graduating, I became front office secretary at the Ritz Paris, before serving as personal assistant to Charles Ritz. Throughout these experiences, enthusiasm, passion, and honesty stood out as hallmark traits of how to lead and how to be successful in this industry.





## HONESTY AND TRANSPARENCY

In 1985, I served as general manager of Sofitel Thalassa Quiberon in France—one of my first serious leadership positions. In this role, I launched an extensive renovations program, and learned the absolute importance of being inclusive of team input during decision making. I also learned to listen carefully to staff needs, and why good leadership demands honesty and transparency—two building blocks of the leader-follower relationship.

## TRUST YOUR TEAM

One of the most important aspects of leadership is to trust your team to make the right decisions, and empower them to take action as necessary. Of course, this is tied to hiring the right people for the right job. But when the right people are in place, and you trust them to execute and deliver, you as a general manager can have more confidence in your own decisions.

## LISTEN MORE

Over the years, I've realized that when employees say they want their voices heard, what they're really saying is that they want to be listened to, included, and respected. A genuine act of listening requires paying



careful attention. Leaders who pay attention to their employees' feedback, concerns, and opinions, have relationships with their colleagues rooted in trust and respect. That kind of relationship fosters a sense of loyalty and commitment.

### THE PURPOSE OF TECHNOLOGY

There are times when I notice that technology becomes a top priority for some luxury hotels. This can be a mistake. Technology must be carefully integrated into the guest experience, but only insofar as it adds to that experience, rather than becoming an end unto

itself. Similarly, the use of technology should not be a substitute for genuine human interaction, so you must evaluate such opportunities with this in mind. The power of human contact cannot be understated, and it is essential to the luxury hospitality experience.

### TRAINING TO PROBLEM SOLVE

At Ciragan Palace Kempinski, we train ourselves to be efficient problem solvers. We send our colleagues to other Kempinski Hotels as part of specific task forces and cross-trainings in order to make them more rounded team members that are knowledgeable in



areas other than their core expertise. This additional exposure also provides a different kind of inspiration and motivation to succeed. Moreover, I believe that continuous engagement with different cultures, lifestyles, and backgrounds is critical to success in our industry given the diversity of both colleagues and clientele.

of the brand and can impact a brand's reputation. In this context, we receive a lot of feedback and comments about a guest's stay via travel and social platforms. We monitor these platforms regularly and respond immediately. Coupled with our guest experience tracking software, any issues or concerns can be noted by staff and made instantly available to others, including department heads, for them to resolve.

## REACT QUICKLY

Customers share their experiences in near real-time on digital review platforms and through social media. In doing so, they become de facto ambassadors



## A LOCAL EXPERIENCE, RICH IN HISTORY

Dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Ciragan Palace Kempinski Istanbul is the only Ottoman Palace and hotel located on the Bosphorus shores. With respect to our history, we are able to showcase the very best of local and traditional cultures to our guests, which are seen all throughout the property from our decoration to our design, and foods and beverages like Turkish baklava, Turkish delights, and Turkish coffee. We also offer a natural and palatial soap service for our guests, honoring the tradition of ancient water therapies of the Turkish Hamam. Our guests can enjoy twelve types of pure olive oil handmade soap, from Jasmine to Cedar Tree, sliced in front of them by their butler. One is for immediate use, and the other is wrapped in a pouch to take home.

## BAKLAVA CHEFS

In addition to catering to all dietary preferences, restrictions, and lifestyles, such as offering a full gluten-free menu in our restaurants and via room service, we have a very special and traditional baklava we create in-house. We have the best baklava chefs on staff from Gaziantep, the land of baklava, and they make everything from scratch. To refresh our offerings, we regularly create new kinds of baklava flavors, including chestnut, coffee, and rose.

## A WORLD-FAMOUS SUITE

One of the ways we differentiate ourselves in the luxury category is through our Sultan Suite, which is one of the most luxurious and iconic suites in the world. With its colossal and beautiful doors, two decorative fire places, lavish chandeliers, artsy columns, replicas of paintings from the famous palace painter Fausto Zonaro, floor to ceiling windows (the height of the room is nearly six meters), and an extraordinary Bosphorus view, this suite combines the best of contemporary with classical Ottoman architecture to recreate the splendor of the palace. All the furniture, including the imperial-style furniture with Ottoman motifs and accessories dating back to the 19th century, are made in Turkey.

## OLD LUXURY VS. NEW LUXURY

Luxury travel is subjective. It all depends on a guest's needs, characteristics, styles, and profiles. A relevant, personal, and exclusive experience will become even more crucial than it is today, and it will be the differentiating factor between old and new luxury.

## FROM BEGINNING TO END

We think about luxury services in a holistic sense, and offer opportunities to be pampered even before

guests arrive at our hotel. For example, with the Ci-ragan Welcome Service, our team greets you at the gate of the plane or at the door of the plane when you arrive. Guided by a colleague, guests are whisked away in a luxury vehicle to the hotel and do not have to worry about a thing. Whether exchanging currency, stopping for a moment at the pharmacy, or purchasing a last minute gift, we will assist you with everything.

### THE CHINESE TRAVELER

One of the most important and emerging markets for luxury travel is China. We should pay special attention to their social media platforms and engage them strategically. These platforms are a way for travelers to buy tickets, pay bills, invest their money, send messages, and socialize. We need to better understand, harness, and partner with these platforms so that we can stay in better touch with, and enhance, the guest experience of our Chinese travelers throughout the world.







# Sjefke Jansen

GENERAL MANAGER,  
BELMOND GRAND HOTEL EUROPE  
(ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIAN  
FEDERATION)

BORN IN:

Heidelberg, Germany

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Russia, Germany, Australia, South  
Africa, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon,  
Singapore, Maldives, Mauritius

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

32

**“This industry is no longer about selling commodities. Today, it's about connecting emotionally with the audience by telling an authentic story. Facts and figures are becoming less and less relevant. Now it's purely about the experience. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up in Heidelberg, Germany, to parents who were in the fashion business. I attended an anthroposophy school, which had a significant impact on my life and continues to inspire me. When I was ten, my father died tragically, so my mother took care of my brother and I for many years before I left home. From a very early age, I learned never to take anything for granted, for life can change in a split second. It was a tough childhood, but I enjoyed the outdoors as much as I could—rugby, cycling, swimming, and running.

My mother has a very sophisticated natural instinct, empathizing with others and understanding emotional meaning. I learned a great deal from her about

how she treated her staff and us as a family. Today, EQ serves as my daily guide both personally and professionally. It is one of the pillars for successful teamwork. There is an inner ambition, not driven by title or money, which is highly motivating for yourself and others. And that's something we all share.

#### **NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART**

I always wanted to become a lawyer, but that was a pipe dream. I didn't really want to study hard, read a lot of books, or analyze cases. My mother knew this, so she encouraged me to pursue a culinary career instead of just hanging around. The first offer that came up was a three-year chef training program in Germany. I accepted. I was a bit of a wild child who





knew no borders. Working in a kitchen as a trainee was the opposite. It was hyper-structured and hierarchical, but I learned the importance of precision and discipline. At the same time, I learned that working in a kitchen is not for the faint of heart.

### A BROADER HORIZON

My first leadership position in hospitality was as a restaurant manager at the Cellars-Hohenort Hotel in Cape Town, South Africa. This experience taught me a great deal about how diverse our industry could be. All of a sudden I was exposed to people and ideas from different backgrounds and cultures. It was inspiring, as it taught me to be open-minded. I also came to realize very quickly that the German approach does, in fact, only work in Germany. I needed to learn to be flexible, adaptable, and open to doing things in new ways.

### THE KEY

Respect and trust, both earned and not demanded, are the key to creating a culture of success. Don't just hear what your team has to say; show genuine care and listen carefully to their ideas and feedback, including them in decisions. Equally important is to create an environment free of fear that allows for an unlimited exchange of ideas from any level of staff.



## COMMON SENSE

Hospitality can be very simple if we understand and appreciate the basics—serving others to make them genuinely happy. Applied in practice, interactions between staff and guests should be one of common sense.

## THREE FUNDAMENTAL VALUES

One of the most important lessons I've learned is that passion, attitude, and integrity form the backbone of good leadership. No matter what level of job, having a passion for service and an optimistic attitude will inevitably lead to positive results. Additionally, always being honest, fair, and ethical will garner the respect and trust of your colleagues.



## STREET SMART

Over the years, I studied people and their behavior in a variety of circumstances and situations, from the subtle to the extreme. By keenly observing people, and having not had any mentors, I came to think of myself as being street smart. Often times you learn what not to do from managers, rather than how best to act. That kind of insight is equally valuable. I have

worked for many supervisors who managed their departments purely through superiority and authority, and less through respect, trust, and knowledge. They all had two things in common—they were insecure and driven by fear. It was always a façade that crumbled eventually. I promised myself I would never lead in such a way if given the opportunity.



## COMMUNICATE TO MOTIVATE

One of the most important aspects to motivating your team and keeping them engaged is open, genuine, informal and formal communication. First and foremost, you need to be visible and approachable. Walk the property every day and speak to whomever you meet on the floor. You will be amazed by what your colleagues tell you if you speak to them in an informal environment such as the corridor, lobby, or restaurant. In addition, we hold quarterly all-staff gatherings and regular one-on-one meetings with department heads to ensure constant dialogue. As a last resort, I send emails to the team. Nothing beats the personal approach.



## LEARN TO PROGRESS

I urge everyone on the team to educate themselves while working to further their career. Whether in person or online training, I urge them to take every opportunity they can to develop professionally. To encourage that ethos, we conduct language classes, on-the-job training, job-related classes, and cross-exposure programs where we send staff to sister properties for a period of time to be exposed to different operations.

## **IMPATIENT MILLENNIALS**

One of the biggest challenges to leading a luxury property today is tied to the current and growing culture of instant gratification. The younger generation of employees are incredibly impatient. They want to be recognized immediately, failing to understand that it takes many years to become successful in this industry. This presents a challenge in recruiting and retaining young employees who are eager to climb the ladder, but not eager to put in the work and time required to progress.

## **OUR HISTORY IS UNMATCHED**

An authentic, local experience is becoming more crucial than ever. Selling a commodity is not difficult—offering something authentic is. The Belmond Grand Hotel Europe is as good as any competitor in the market, but what we're really selling is history. Our property is 141 years old and has always been a hotel. We opened the first fine-dining restaurant in Russia. We had the first restaurant with electric light in Russia. Over the years, we've had every politician, statesman, artist, and celebrity stay with us. Elton John once performed an impromptu concert in the hotel over dinner. Dostoevsky wrote books in our hotel. Tchaikovsky composed music in his room and Pavarotti sang from the balcony to an audience standing on the street.

## **EXCLUSIVE EXPERIENCES**

Built over many years, our relationships throughout the community are some of the strongest in the city. For example, we have our own private box, five meters from the stage in Mikhailovsky Theater. There are only four seats available, all of which are reserved for guests. We can also arrange special access to The Hermitage Museum afterhours, when it is closed to the public, or organize a visit to the restoration rooms of the Russian Museum, where guests can see how antiques are being restored. Coupled with unique partnerships with Dom Perignon and Hennessy, we're able to offer some of the most exclusive experiences in the world.

## **VIRTUAL REALITY**

This industry is no longer about selling commodities. Today, it's about connecting emotionally with the audience by telling an authentic story. Facts and figures are becoming less relevant. Now it's purely about the experience. In this new context, I believe print media will have little to no future given its limited ability to form the type of emotional connection that can be created through digital means. I believe that virtual reality is the future of luxury hospitality. You will be able to create and experience an entire journey without ever leaving your living room. The ride from

the airport to the hotel, a welcome message from the general manager, a tour of the lobby, room, kitchen, and more. The virtual vacation is where we're headed.

## THE SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGE

We are bombarded with images and information 24/7, and filtering what is truly relevant is becoming increasingly difficult. In most cases, you may read a headline and glance at some incredible photos. But the reality is that snippet of attention is insufficient to create a lasting positive reputation of your brand. Moreover, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram have massive, diverse audiences, and it is very hard to measure which audience specifically is your target market. In other words, it's great exposure, but is there a measurable or tangible return on that effort? I'm not certain.







Photos Courtesy of Ararat Park Hyatt Moscow

# Stephen Ansell

GENERAL MANAGER,  
ARARAT PARK HYATT MOSCOW  
(RUSSIAN FEDERATION)

BORN IN:  
London, United Kingdom

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:  
Russia, United Kingdom, Austria,  
Germany, China, Saudi  
Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan,  
Ukraine, United States

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:  
25

**“It is important to get to know each colleague individually, understanding their needs, interests, and future plans. Only then can you tailor your approach of encouragement and development to bring out the very best they have to offer.”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I was born in London but spent my childhood in Southeast Asia and Europe due to my father and his work with British Petroleum. My first experience with Hyatt was when I was six, when my family was accommodated at the Grand Hyatt Singapore for a month during a relocation. Apparently, I took a great interest in helping the housekeeping staff, foreshadowing my future. Living in many different countries and cultures from a very young age instilled in me a passion for traveling and adventure. I wanted to continue that lifestyle in the form of a career.

#### **A TASTE OF THE INDUSTRY**

My first job in hospitality was when I was sixteen. I worked at a small, Austrian family hotel in the Alps. In the morning, I worked at the reception, then as a waiter at the swimming pool, and then serving lunch and dinner. I learned a great deal participating in and observing a range of operations throughout the hotel. Nothing beats firsthand experience in an environment where you’re exposed to all facets of the business.

#### **WHERE I LEARNED THE MOST**

After studying hospitality, I embarked on an international career by enrolling in a management train-





ing program with Hilton International in Munich, Germany. Looking back at all of my early management experiences, this is where I learned the most. The program gave me insight into all aspects of a hotel, including a six-month position in charge of stewarding. I was constantly reminded that in our business, the most important people we work with every day come from all walks of life, often with different backgrounds and life experiences. This applies to both staff and guests. On this team, we had a truly cosmopolitan group of people in which diversity and difference was embraced, respected, and valued.

### **ADAPTING TO SHOCK**

My first leadership position in the industry was as an assistant restaurant manager at Terminal 4 in London's Heathrow Airport. While working there, the company went into receivership and senior management departed. The remaining supervisory team was asked to continue operations, ensuring staff like myself still received salaries. Suppliers were refusing to make deliveries and stock was running low. Pushing forward required smart negotiations and creative management. In the face of a seemingly intractable situation, I learned that imaginative problem-solving, determination, and sheer resolve can, in fact, save a business.

## **DESIGNING A CULTURE OF SUCCESS**

As we say in the world of Hyatt, “a little understanding goes a long way.” Essentially, this translates into treating each other with respect, valuing difference of opinion, being inclusive in your decision-making, acting with compassion and empathy, walking in the shoes of others, and listening carefully.

## **CHARGING THROUGH HEADWINDS**

Having been in Russia for the past seven years, various geopolitical factors have made the economic environment, on occasion, somewhat challenging. It is during these times you learn the most about how to adapt your strategy to fit the moment. The faster you react, the better you will fare.

## **BEING FIRST HAS CHALLENGES**

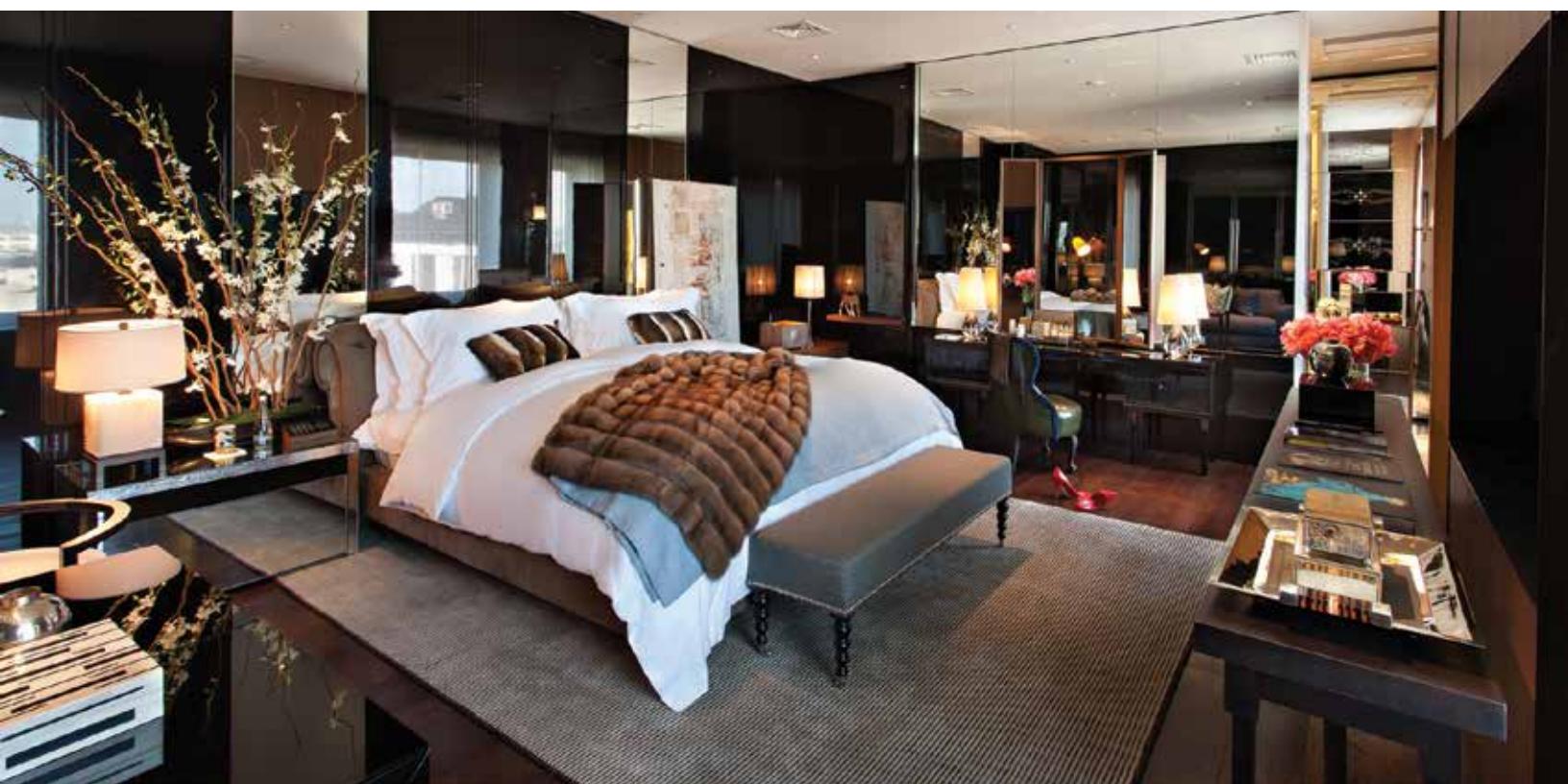
Prior to working in Russia, I was fortunate to open the Hyatt Regency Kyiv, the first international five-star hotel in Ukraine. We were covering new ground and thus actively involved in all aspects of the supply chain, including extensive, and on occasion challenging, interactions with our suppliers and partners. Achieving a true sense of luxury is no easy task, particularly when the system in place to deliver on that promise does not yet exist.

## **A LESSON IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

While serving as general manager of the Hyatt Regency Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, a political revolution gripped the country. This was a very difficult time and a real-life lesson in crisis management. I learned once again the value of a trusted, passionate local team, and how important our close relationships with the community were in seeing us through this period.

## **HIRING FOR SUCCESS**

The key to success is hiring people who are true to your values. If we are able to identify a curious person who is inclusive, honest, empathetic, and joyful, then the technical components of the job can be learned. Regardless of a candidate’s experience, we encourage them to share stories about their successes, failures, and what they learned in both cases. Are they able to reflect anew? Our goal is to create an environment where no one takes themselves too seriously, where we have fun at work, and where we also get to know an individual’s interests and ambitions. In order to ensure we’re all aligned, all applicants get interviewed by human resources, senior management, and then myself.





## A GO-TO PERSON

All recruits undergo a specific coaching aimed at providing a solid understanding of our culture. We answer a bevy of questions: What is our mission? How do we work together? Who are my colleagues? What do I need to do to be successful? After passing the induction, a personal coach is assigned to you in your department for the first three months. This is a critical process, as every new member of the team has a go-to person to take care of them, answer all their questions, help them face their first challenge, and ensure they make the right decisions.

## TAILORED MOTIVATION

Motivation is not only about professional growth and salary. It is also about being a part of a strong, caring team, building genuine friendships with colleagues, and an atmosphere of trust. It is important to get to know each colleague individually, understanding their needs, interests, and future plans. Only then can you tailor your approach of encouragement and development to bring out the very best they have to offer.

## **TURNOVER**

As general managers, we must also accept the fact that many members of our workforce may not end up in long-term careers in the luxury hospitality business. We should see this as an opportunity, as it allows us the freedom to recruit from a wide variety of people with different backgrounds, experiences, and interests. Even short-term colleagues can have a meaningful impact on our guests, provided they are motivated and committed to establishing human connections.

## **WORK-LIFE BALANCE**

One of the most challenging aspects of the industry today is ensuring that hospitality remains a desirable career option for young people. We are still fighting our poor reputation in terms of compensation and unsociable working hours. A healthy work-life balance is becoming the norm, and if we are serious about attracting the best talent, it is our responsibility to create the right environment. Hyatt has done much to address this question over the years, and the industry more generally has made progress.

When I joined this industry twenty-five years ago, working sixty hours a week was a prerequisite to success. Things have changed. I believe hotels that

implement a reasonable work-life balance policy will increase the desirability of the profession and at the end of the day will offer a better customer experience.

## **A CHANCE TO ADVANCE**

One of the most rewarding aspects of the job is providing mentorship and growth opportunities to the team. I encourage all of our associates to travel extensively in order to broaden their horizons and experience different countries. By working for a rapidly growing international hotel company, such opportunities are in abundance and perfectly compliment formal training programs.

## **MARKETING CLASS**

One of our most successful collaborations we embarked on was with a local university. We invited a class of marketing students to create a plan to promote the opening of a new restaurant. It was an incredibly affordable, creative, and worthwhile experience as we ended up with five very thoughtful proposals to choose from. The prize for the winning proposal was a week-long stay at one of our hotels. We ultimately chose a plan that included four teaser emails commencing one month prior to opening, with each one telling a story of the restaurant, accompanied by

a voucher. Customers who kept all four vouchers were treated to a three-course menu with wine.

## AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT

The sheer volume of communication on social media is rather daunting at times. Of course, the ability to cost-effectively present our story to a targeted audience is an important opportunity. At the same time, the luxury hospitality industry is epitomized by personal connection and personalized service. I still try to answer all of our TripAdvisor reviews personally, but the challenge is to stay ahead of the game, bearing in mind the volume of feedback we receive and our goal of turning every comment or post into an authentic engagement.







# Susanne Hatje

**GENERAL MANAGER,  
MANDARIN ORIENTAL, NEW YORK  
(UNITED STATES)**

**BORN IN:**

Hamburg, Germany

**SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:**

United States, China, Germany,  
France

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:**

29

*Photo on Left Courtesy of Robert Stanzione  
Photos Courtesy of Mandarin Oriental New York*

**“In today’s hospitality environment, balancing operational needs with the expectation of financial performance, all the while managing key relationships across the property, is both challenging and critical.”**

#### GROWING UP

I was born in Hamburg, Germany, to parents who were both hoteliers, so I literally grew up in the industry. They were the owner-operators of Hotel Heuberg in Hamburg, which is still a family-run business today with my brother in charge. Being immersed in the industry from day one, I learned how to be an effective hotelier at an early age. My parents taught me the importance of care and concern, following through on your commitments, and appreciating every business as though it were your own—whether you were the owner or an operational colleague.

My grandmother was also in the industry, and was instrumental in the success of Hotel Heuberg. She knew every aspect of the business and imparted her age-old wisdom to the team on things like how best to get rid of carpet stains.

#### CLOSE TO HOME

My first role outside the family business was as an apprentice at the five-star Hotel Atlantic Kempinski in Hamburg in 1988. Not only was it a great opportunity to learn about luxury hospitality, but it helped that I was able to stay in my home city as I started out my career—surrounded by family and friends for support. I started out in the laundry room and worked my way up. Starting from the bottom and rising through the ranks is absolutely critical. It teaches you every part of the operation, and you learn to respect and admire the work of your colleagues. Only then do you understand how valuable each individual’s role is to ensuring the overall success of a hotel.





## A PERFECT OPPORTUNITY

My first leadership position in the industry came in 1992 as director of rooms at The Mark, a five-star hotel in New York City. Sometime after, I was promoted to assistant manager of the property. It was an incredible opportunity to work in one of the most competitive and fastest-growing hospitality markets in the world. I learned a tremendous amount about the local dynamics of the industry, the different types of travelers visiting New York City, and how to pinpoint the qualities of effective leaders in other management roles. Most importantly, this experience provided me with a deeper appreciation and understanding of cultural diversity.

## OPEN COMMUNICATION

As general manager, I believe it's important to constantly have an open dialogue with the team to inspire innovation, a hunger for excellence, and success. I interact with many of my colleagues every day, whether in the heart-of-house or front-of-house. Whether greeting staff in the morning or discussing issues with the whole executive team, being available, approachable, and appreciative are essential to success. Often, guests will comment through satisfaction surveys, TripAdvisor, or in direct conversation with our team to acknowledge a specific colleague that made a spe-



cial mark on their stay. Openly recognize and celebrate those that go above and beyond.

#### **PERSONALIZED SERVICE, ON A WHIM**

There once was a couple staying with us that decided they wanted to get married on a whim at Ladies Pavilion in Central Park. We quickly arranged for a last-minute justice of the peace, a photographer, and

a horse and carriage. Our chief concierge, Kenneth Abisror, served as the couple's witness, and kindly requested that park visitors clear the space just prior to the wedding, inviting them to look on while the ceremony took place. Despite the couple not having family or friends around them to watch them get married, they were surrounded by a circle of New Yorkers who took part in celebrating the occasion.



## SLUMBER PARTY

We once had a guest that rented out one of our Signature Suites for their daughter's thirteenth birthday, where we threw a slumber party for her and her friends. In addition to sleeping bags and lots of pillows so they could watch movies all night, we brought in a popcorn machine and ice cream cart so they could make their own sundaes.

## THE VAST ROLE OF A GM

As general manager, I must be a part of every facet of the business—finance, marketing, rooms, and beyond. In today's hospitality environment, balancing operational needs with the expectation of financial performance, all the while managing key relationships across the property, is both challenging and critical. Indeed, we also face a host of external chal-





lenges, such as being located in the heart of one of the most competitive and fastest-growing hospitality markets anywhere in the world. We also need to take into consideration changing societal, financial, and political climates.

### A LOCAL EXPERIENCE

Every hotel within the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group features nuances that link back to our Oriental heritage, such as the elements of fire and water. In addition, each property is designed with a feng shui expert. Most hotels in New York have to create their sense of place, but given our location and positioning, our sense of place is showcased at its best simply by looking out the window onto Central Park. Our suites contain work from local artists, we include local magazines in each of the rooms and suites, and even our Mandarin Oriental, New York signature fan was designed by NYC-designer Vivienne Tam. Every hotel has their own fan that's also representative of that destination.

### INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS

On the social media front, we recently partnered with photographer Alice Gao on our MyViewYork campaign, featuring images of both famous and un-



expected views of New York City in an effort to inspire visitors and locals alike to discover the city with a fresh perspective.

Because New York City is one of the world's fashion capitals, we promoted our new suites in partnership with New York-based designer Joseph Altuzarra, while also launching our Bedside Reading Program. We featured books that have inspired the collections for his women's ready-to-wear brand over the years.

### **RAISING THE BAR**

To keep things interesting and innovative, we have regular guest chef pop-ups in our signature restaurant, Asiate. In early fall 2017, we unveiled the new Aviary NYC and The Office NYC from Chicago-based Chef Grant Achatz and his business partner, Nick Kokonas of The Alinea Group. Like the Chicago flagship location, the menu gives a nod to the New York City experience, featuring classic cocktails as well. Our state-of-the art restaurant for drinks and lounge, The Aviary NYC, provides our guests with a truly unforgettable culinary experience.

### **HOT DOG DELIVERY**

We once had a guest that requested a packing service prior to their departure. One of our colleagues

in housekeeping was assigned to his room and while preparing his items, the guest made a comment about how he missed a chance to experience a traditional New York City hot dog. After concluding the service, our colleague ran down to Central Park and purchased two hot dogs, delivering them to the room before he departed. Needless to say, the guest was blown away and truly touched by how our team paid such close attention to detail. What started out as innocent small talk turned into a genuine moment of delight and surprise.

### **HOME AWAY FROM HOME**

There was one occasion where a guest stayed with us but, for the first time, was traveling without their children. Our colleague asked the guest's spouse for some family photos and we arranged for them to be playing on the guest's TV upon arrival, along with a warm welcome letter so they could "see" their children even though they were not with them. It was truly a heartfelt moment and the guest was moved to tears.

### **HIDDEN GEM**

We have one suite available to guests that we don't advertise publicly. It is only accessible and bookable

by contacting our sales or reservations teams directly. The reason we don't advertise Suite 5000 is because in addition to wanting to maintain the exclusive air of the suite, the clientele that stay here tend to be very private and we want to maintain their privacy.

In addition to the extensive artwork collection, the three-bedroom suite features elegant design touches, including a light-reflecting Swarovski crystal wall, floor-to-ceiling views of Central Park, the Hudson River, and the Manhattan skyline, a curated record collection, an impressive state-of-the-art media center, and more.

## A DESTINATION AUTHORITY

Some years ago we launched a campaign titled 365 Reasons Why We Love NYC. It showcased the local community through a variety of press and social media efforts, featuring iconic locations throughout New York City. From stadiums like the Barclays Center and entertainment venues like the Ed Sullivan Theater, to iconic eateries like Nathan's and world-famous events like Fashion Week, each photo was posted with a note about what made it so special to New York City. The campaign was incredibly successful, and supported our notion of why it's essential for a hotel like ours to be a destination authority.







# Taljinder Singh

**AREA DIRECTOR, MUMBAI HOTELS,  
TAJ HOTELS PALACES RESORTS  
SAFARIS**

**GENERAL MANAGER,  
THE TAJ MAHAL PALACE, MUMBAI  
(INDIA)**

**BORN IN:**

Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India

**SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:**

India

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:**

27

*Photos Courtesy of Taj Hotels Resorts and Palaces*



**“When I started out as an assistant lobby manager at the Taj Mahal Hotel in New Delhi, there was no technology in place to track the guest experience. I was expected to know the history of the top 250 guests of the hotel, verbatim. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I was born and raised in a small town in the Himalayan Mountains named Shimla, in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Growing up, I loved to explore the outdoors and discover different forests, jungles, and streams. Coming from a paramilitary household, I was disciplined to focus on education, honesty, integrity, and doing the right thing.

#### **STARTING FROM SCRATCH**

I first ventured into hospitality as a management trainee for The Taj Group. It was a two-year program, and I had absolutely no background in the industry before I enrolled. My original idea was to gain expe-

rience and then move abroad for a postgraduate business management degree, but that never happened. Given my ambitions, and while I continued working for the company after my training, Taj sponsored a series of courses at some of the best-known institutions of learning in India and around the world. Their commitment to my personal and professional growth taught me the importance of investing in your team.

#### **THE BOSS IS WATCHING**

My first job in the industry was as an assistant lobby manager at the iconic Taj Mahal Hotel in New Delhi. At the time, it was the second most important hotel of the company, right behind The Taj Mahal Palace in Bombay, which was their global flagship.



The leadership team of the company regularly parked themselves at the New Delhi property when meeting with key business and government leaders, so expectations were extremely high. My first manager was a tough individual with a very demanding work ethic. When I made the mistake of not knowing where a particular VIP guest was after having crossed the lobby, the manager said I needed to “develop eyes in the back of my head” if I wanted to be a successful front office agent and ultimately a hotelier. In those days, there was no technology to easily track customers. I was expected to know the history of the top 250 guests of the hotel.

## EARLY MENTORS

When I first started working at The Taj Mahal Hotel in New Delhi, the resident manager at the time, Patu Keswani, became my mentor. He constantly pushed me to do more, to be better, challenging me to take on new projects and assignments over and above my duties. His analytical ability and understanding of how to maximize revenue had a great influence on me. I learned to pay close attention to numbers, and had awoken to the financial lens of the business—and just how important it was. Together, we wrote the first-ever presentation on revenue management in The Taj Group. Later on, he tasked me with making that same presentation to young graduating students

of the management training program and other front office managers across The Taj Group to introduce them to the concept.

Ronnie Lobo, the general manager at the time, also became an incredibly important mentor to me and remained so for many years long after he left the company. One of the most important qualities I gleaned from his leadership and management style is how he treated people with the utmost respect, fairness, sincerity, and empathy.

## GENUINE CARE

When we hire new recruits, the most important aspect we look for is whether they are the right fit from a values perspective. Are they intrinsically hardworking? Do they have a high degree of integrity and graciousness? Do they have a natural willingness to be of assistance to others? Once hired, on-boarding new employees is not simply about going through the motions of an orientation process. It is about getting them to connect emotionally with the brand and being immersed in the fabric and culture of the organization. If that connection is not made, there will be issues with the delivery of quality and service. Artificial care is easily spotted and can do real damage to the guest experience. Instead, genuine care and concern is appreciated and understood far better than mere lip service.

## **AN INDUSTRY CHALLENGE**

The biggest challenge facing the industry today is high turnover, and finding people with the right attitude and disposition to care for others. If you are looking to join the world of luxury hospitality, the most important advice I can give is that you need to understand whether your own temperament is geared towards genuine care and assistance or not, and whether creating memorable experiences for others is something you aspire to do and something that brings you joy.

## **PRINT VS. DIGITAL**

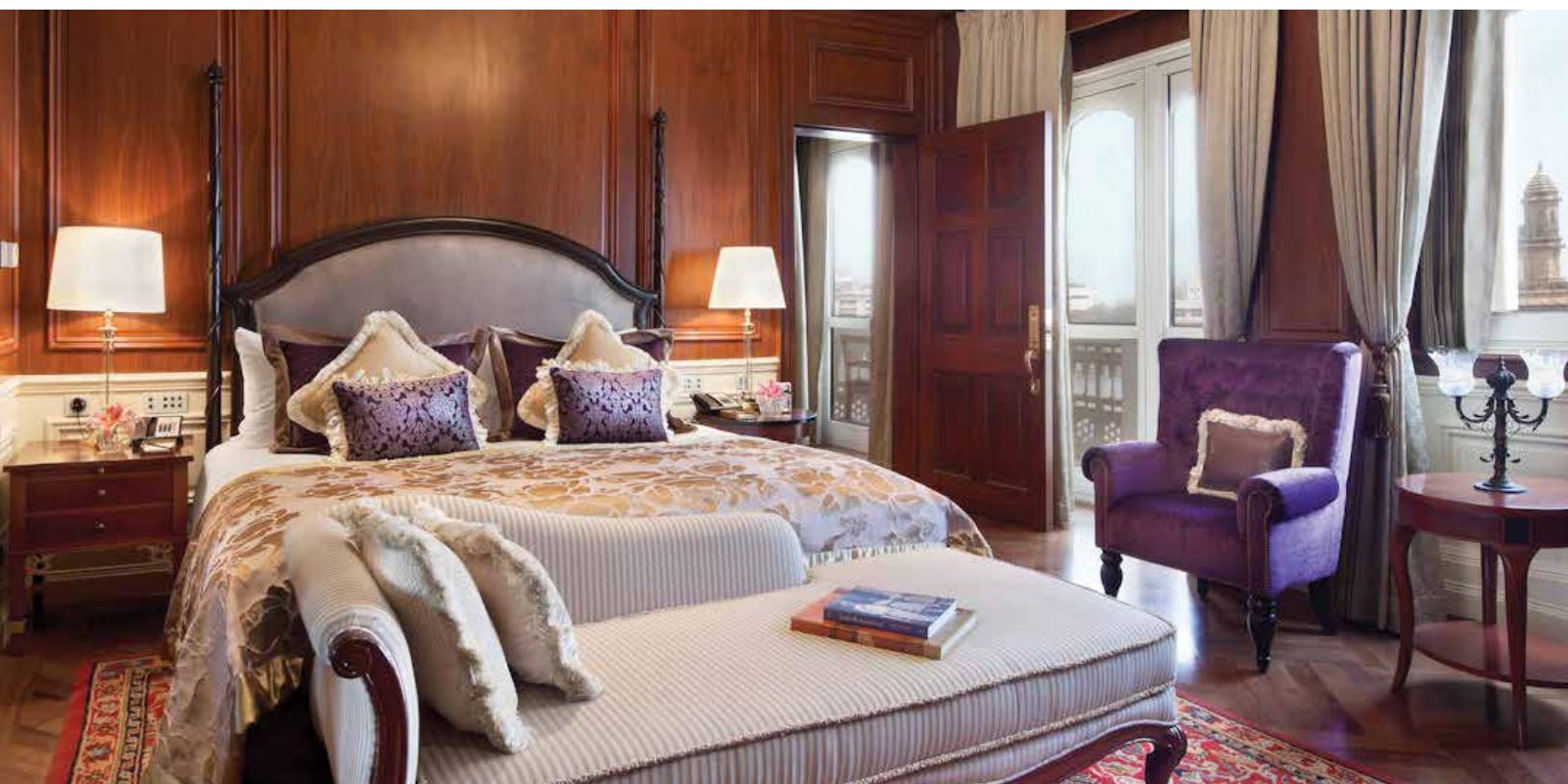
Today, digital marketing in all its forms is critical to reaching relevant consumers around the world. However, print certainly continues to play a role, particularly when guests are in-house and begin to touch and feel the properties in which they reside. Additionally, the sensory experience of flipping through a rich paper or magazine cannot be underestimated. The digital screen can only appeal to some of our senses, not all. The backlight of a tablet, too, often used to show menus at some restaurants, can be a major irritant to diners.

## **THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Reputation management is becoming increasingly important, specifically in the context of social media and a variety of online review platforms. Real-time responses and engagement that demonstrate empathy, care, and concern can either make or break your brand. While some reviewers will pen unreasonable and even biased criticism of their particular stay or of the hotel more generally, handling such reviews with care and compassion can go a long way towards protecting your brand. The important thing when reacting to digital criticism of any kind is to stay true to the brand ethos in letter and spirit.

## **ON CALL, ALL THE TIME**

One of the great aspects of real-time digital feedback is the democratic environment in which it's received. Anyone that comes in contact with the brand can share their experience. This new environment gives every organization a kind of instant diagnosis of their service and reputation. Therefore, we have an immediate opportunity to course correct if necessary. At the same time, negative feedback or criticism is often believed to be true until it is disproven or reacted to. In other words, the brand in question is guilty until proven innocent. In the end, this new reality is both a gift and a curse, with the power to truly defame. As





hoteliers, we are brand custodians, and we need to react in near real-time to be credible, putting us on call around the clock.

## THE NEW CONCIERGE

In the age of information abundance, the luxury concierge must take on the mantle of cultural researcher, and have the innate ability to connect the dots with a guest on the basis of sheer perceptiveness. For example, a concierge should be able to recommend and deliver a private tour of a vintage car collection in the city by merely noticing a guest wearing a T-shirt with a vintage car club logo. Extreme perceptiveness and in-depth knowledge is in more demand than ever. In addition, extracting and documenting a guest's preferences, likes, and dislikes can only be done through authentic conversations held by well-informed front-line associates and other staff at every level of the hotel. All staff must be trained to elicit such insight in a genuine, unobtrusive way to continually drive anticipatory service and experience.

## TECHNOLOGY CAN HELP, AND HURT

Integrating technology into a guest experience can be a double-edged sword. Guests are quick to reject cumbersome operating logic of electronics and soft-

ware. Simplified technology to enable entertainment options or business solutions will gain the respect of the traveler. The key is not to integrate technology for technology's sake, particularly if it's difficult to use. It must be simple and easy to operate, period.

## A HYPER-LOCAL EXPERIENCE

Today's traveler is extremely well-informed about the traditions and cultures that they would like to experience. Delivering on those expectations in the most authentic way possible is critical to success. In dining, for example, using authentic ingredients and preparation methods. In health and wellness, authentic offerings tied to the ancient sciences of ayurveda, the 3000-year old traditional Indian practice of whole-body healing. Such offerings are not easy to create and deliver, but they are critical to the local experience. More broadly, culinary excellence in luxury hotels now includes an expectation of reviving lost cuisines and recipes of the locality—transporting guests to a unique and historical dining experience.



# Tom Roelens

GENERAL MANAGER,  
FOUR SEASONS RESORTS LANA'I  
(HAWAII, UNITED STATES)

*Recently appointed General Manager of the  
Four Seasons Hotel and Residences in  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

BORN IN: Deinze, Belgium

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Malaysia, United States,  
Belgium, France, United Arab  
Emirates, Indonesia, Maldives

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

33

**“Today’s traveler deeply values experiences and a sense of place. Increasingly, guests are not content to simply lounge by the resort pool. Instead, they seek authentic activities that provide a real connection to the destination.”**

#### GROWING UP

I was born and raised in Deinze, about one hour west of Brussels, Belgium. I enjoyed the outdoors and traveling with my parents. My grandfather used to run a plantation in the Belgian Congo, and the many adventure stories he shared of his experience generated a strong sense of curiosity in me about other cultures and destinations. I am also extremely lucky and grateful to have parents who have always been very supportive of my career aspirations. When I first announced at a very young age that I wanted to go to hotel school, eyebrows raised, but once my parents saw my passion for hospitality and for being of service, they allowed me to flourish.

#### AN EARLY START

I entered the hospitality industry at the age of fourteen and never looked back. I started in the kitchen washing dishes, and then served in a more visible role in restaurants as a Commis de Rang. Initially, I started working in one, two, and three-star Michelin restaurants in Belgium and France. Back then, I was not allowed to communicate with guests. I was only allowed to bring out the food and beverage items and hand them over to the captain or maitre d’, who would then engage with customers. I learned early on that no matter what position you’re in, you must be humble, open to feedback, learn from your mistakes, and continually strive for excellence.



## A SHIFT TO HOTELS

After studying hospitality and hotel management, including a postgraduate degree in public relations, I joined the hotel industry in 1992 at the SAS Royal Hotel in Brussels. I held various roles in the food and beverage division, including my first leadership position as assistant room service manager. It was the first time I worked in such a diverse environment, where every team member came from a different background and had very different priorities in life. It taught me to truly value diversity and difference, and to play to the strengths of each of my colleagues in order to build a strong team. In 1996, I joined the InterContinental Hotel Dubai as assistant director of catering, before succumbing to the allure of Asia and the idyllic isle of Bali, Indonesia, where I eventually became the executive assistant manager of the Nusa Dua Beach Hotel and Spa.

## BE OUR GUEST

All new employees at Four Seasons Resort Lana'i participate in a series of on-boarding and training programs. In Lana'i, it is a two-day affair to ensure that new recruits learn about the goals and beliefs of our company and familiarize themselves with the very unique culture of Hawai'i and the history of Lana'i. Additionally, once they land in their departments, we

monitor them closely and provide additional training on a regular basis. When you hire motivated people, you need to train them to perform in an extraordinary way. We also invite staff members to experience the property, so as to see it through the eyes of our guests.

## A HIGH BAR, AT MINIMUM

One of the biggest challenges to leading a world-class hotel or resort is ensuring consistency in the delivery of service. There are thousands of touchpoints every single day between guests and employees, as well as with vendors, the community, and beyond. We set the bar extremely high for ourselves—delivering 100 percent of the service experience 100 percent of the time. In my mind, that is a minimum. Then you move onto personalization and how best to customize the experience for each guest and wow them with intuitive service.

## A PEOPLE BUSINESS

Ultimately, the luxury hospitality industry is a people business. You can have the most amazing physical asset in a beautiful natural surrounding and in an idyllic location. But it all comes down to people and the service they provide. That's what makes the dif-

ference between whether or not guests decide to rave to their friends and family about the experience. It's that simple.

## AN AUTHENTIC CONNECTION

Today's traveler deeply values experiences and a sense of place. Increasingly, guests are not content to simply lounge by the resort pool. Instead, they seek authentic activities that provide a real connection to the destination. While Four Seasons Resort Lana'i was being overhauled over many months prior to the relaunch, our staff continued to remain employed. They worked on cultural and preservation projects, including restoring an ancient Hawaiian fishpond and clearing land that yielded ancient village remains, such as storage facilities and temples. Guests can now participate on a guided Polaris UTV tour and learn more about how the people of Lana'i lived, from guides who have a deep appreciation for the land and culture.

In addition, we partnered with a local nonprofit—the Lana'i Culture and Heritage Center—who recently launched a new mobile app funded by the Hawaiian Tourism Authority with information about sacred places on the island, as well as historic photos, maps, and audio stories.

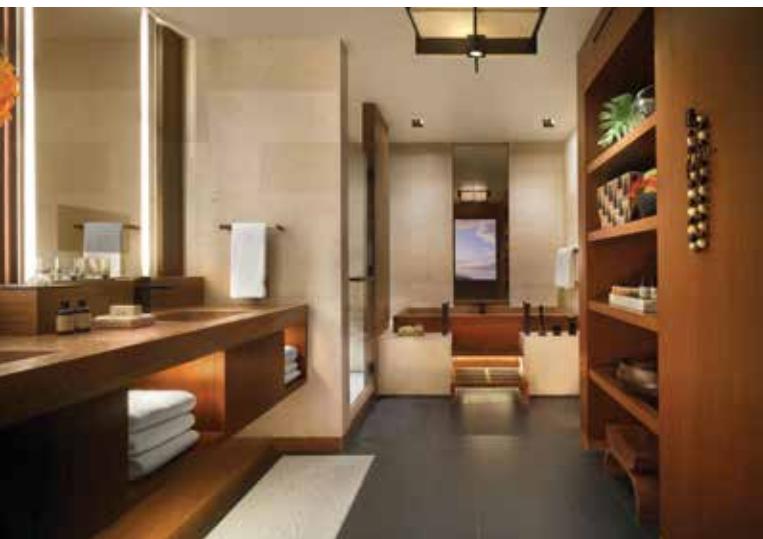
## DIGITAL FEEDBACK

Just because someone is now more likely to review us online shouldn't change how we think about delivering a world-class service. We must always be striving for excellence. What's different is that now we have more opportunities for feedback. While our goal is to connect with guests while they're on property, the reality is that not everyone is comfortable providing feedback in person or in the moment. Online reviews allow us to learn more about our guests' experiences and still connect with them after the fact, if needed.

## COMMITMENT TO IMPROVE

One of the keys to success is being open to all types of feedback—from both staff and guests. We cannot be defensive. Whether a guest voices an issue in the lobby, or makes a specific comment on TripAdvisor, or takes the time to express a concern through the survey they receive following their stay, we must understand exactly what happened and resolve to fix it. This also applies to feedback from employees. Whether an issue was heard in the hallway, reported to their supervisor, or brought directly to the attention of the general manager, it must be welcomed, understood, and resolved.





## A BLEND OF ROLES

Today, our Lana'i Ambassadors blend the concierge and front desk roles seamlessly. To start, they greet you at the airport in Honolulu prior to your flight to the island. To enhance the experience, we launched an exclusive guest lounge at the international airport in Honolulu. We are the only resort in Hawaii providing such a high-end experience. Guests can check in, make reservations, grab a bite, charge their electronics, and visit again on their return trip. Our team will then greet you when you land, escort you to your room, and answer any and all questions or requests during your stay.

## EVERY OPTION, ANY TIME

True luxury is having all options available at any given time. In that spirit, we do not require our guests to reserve a tee time for our magnificent Jack Nicklaus Signature Manele golf course. They treat the golf course as their own private escape, and they can walk on at any moment. We expect them, and are ready. From personalized amenities in the room, to custom experiences on-site, to a luxury vehicle at their disposal for off-site activities, we strive to provide the most tailored experience possible.



### AT YOUR SERVICE, 24/7

One of the most successful integrations of technology thus far into the guest experience is our text messaging service, available twenty-four hours a day. Guests nowadays are more comfortable texting, rather than picking up a phone. Responding to this dynamic, and to increase the efficiency and speed in which we respond to a guest request, we instituted a messaging system for any and all queries. Originally a pilot in select properties, Four Seasons Chat, which now includes Facebook Messenger, WeChat, and

SMS, is now rolling out across all properties through 2018. Today, guests text us about their wake up calls, room service orders, and activities they would like to do while on island. We provide this service to any guest—past, present, and future—and it has been extremely well received.

### ABOVE AND BEYOND

Intuitive and anticipatory service can mean different things for different people. It could be remembering

their favorite food or cocktail, placing a treat or gift in room for their children, noting if someone gets out of the bed on the right or left side and placing slippers there, or simply recalling something they said during a conversation, perhaps about a desired outing, and arranging it all for them before they ask.

### A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

You have to put yourself in the minds of your guests, and think about what they look for at home and how that translates into a home-away-from-home experience. Despite being away from the hustle and bustle, today's guests are expecting a very fast Internet connection to keep up with their social and business activities. To meet the demand, we offer an incredibly high-speed, complimentary Wi-Fi service throughout the resort.

In our rooms, the innovations include wristband keys with RFID technology, so all you have to do is just wear your waterproof key down to the beach or to play golf. In room, we have seventy-five-inch TVs, iPads with resort destination information, dining menus, and more. There's a TV in the bathroom vanity mirror and electronic Toto toilets with heated seats. We also provide plenty of charging stations in easy to reach locations, so there's no need to kneel by the doorway with your phone.

### A LOW-KEY ENVIRONMENT

Each guest is different, even the ones that are used to being in the limelight. Here on Lanai, our guests are seeking a low-key environment. We don't have, nor do we ever want, throngs of paparazzi milling about in our small plantation town of just 3,000 residents. For certain guests, luxury is being able to be incognito during their stay. In other locations, they may not be seeking such privacy and exclusivity.





# Torsten van Dullemen

GENERAL MANAGER,  
THE LANDMARK MANDARIN ORIENTAL  
(HONG KONG)

BORN IN:

The Hague, Netherlands

SELECT GEOGRAPHICAL  
EXPERIENCE:

Hong Kong, Netherlands, United  
Kingdom, Italy, Antigua, India,  
Thailand, The Philippines

YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:

32

**“Twenty years ago, guests checked in, guests checked out, and you focused on service. Today, if you don’t understand the legal aspect, the pace of technology, digital marketing, public affairs, and how to work with owners and shareholders, you cannot run a hotel successfully. ”**

#### **GROWING UP**

I grew up in Maassluis, a small town of less than 20,000 people in the Netherlands. It was in the heart of agricultural Holland, so we had lots of farms and greenhouses with vegetables and fruit. In that sense, it was a very healthy and active childhood. As a kid, we had no money, cinemas, or entertainment. Most of the time we would ride our bikes, swim in the lake, skate around, or play sports. I developed a love for nature and the outdoors. We were a very close-knit family and traveled a lot when I was younger. Nothing like today, but definitely more than my friends.

My mother had Russian roots and my father’s family was mostly from Holland, with a bit of German. My mother looked after us as a family, making sure we were in good shape. She cooked, cleaned, shopped, and everything else, while my father rose, through the ranks of a company named Esselte, which manufactured office products and business supplies. They grew up in World War II with nothing. They would go weeks without food. Stability was their salvation. The only way you achieved that was to work hard and give as many opportunities you could to your children to succeed. And that’s exactly what they did.



## ON-THE-JOB TRAINING

My first job was in a local bistro, where I helped in every way. If they needed me to peel potatoes, I peeled potatoes. If they needed me to clean the basement, I cleaned the basement. If they needed me to change the beer barrels or to manage the bar, then I would do that too. It was an early lesson in just how many tasks there are to running a restaurant.

From there, I joined a one-star Michelin restaurant that was more structured, but where I still helped out as needed. There were only twelve tables and forty seats, but we were always busy. They paid me in cash while giving me a crash course in the restaurant business—how you spend money, how you save money, how you upsell, and more.

## A CAREER LAUNCHPAD

My first position in the luxury hotel industry was as a reservations agent at The Savoy in London, which was arguably the best hotel in the city at the time and had perhaps the most capable front desk anywhere in the world. I learned to work very hard, how to plan for guest arrivals and track their preferences, how to communicate with other departments in the hotel, and more broadly, how to most effectively run a front desk operation in great detail. The hotel was

90 percent occupied year round, resulting in a very busy front desk, but we were a small and effective team that got the job done.

The role did not come without challenges. We worked eighteen-hour days, usually from 12 AM to 6 PM the following day. It was a very tough work environment, and my rent was higher than my salary. My wife had to use her savings so we could live. After almost three years, my career accelerated and everything paid off.

## STRAIGHTFORWARD LEADERSHIP

My first leadership position was as *chef de brigade* at The Savoy in London, where I was in charge of shifts. From the very beginning, I was fair, direct, and protective of my team. They knew I was always there for them, and I jumped in when they needed my help. I was the youngest of the team by far, dealing with some very strong personalities, so I had to develop the confidence to lead. In the end, a team that respects one another and trusts one another is a team that will pull through together.

## EARNING THE RIGHT TO LEAD

I've learned that no matter what your title is or how impressive your qualifications, if people do not get inspired by you and are not comfortable with you

being their leader, something will always be off. Your team needs to connect with you, respect you, trust you, and value your ability to motivate them. You have to earn this relationship. It does not come automatically.

### **LESS IS MORE**

Leaders always give themselves too much credit when things go well, and never take enough blame when things go wrong. On a daily basis, trees that allow more rain and sun to hit the ground underneath them, are the ones surrounded by the most beautiful flowers. You need to hire the right person, motivate them and empower them to take action. I will make sure people know what my expectations are, but I will never tell them how to do their job. My job is to make sure they are set up for success, then get out of the way.

### **THE NEW RECRUIT**

On-boarding a new recruit can take place long before they arrive to the property. You can send them key information to read and digest, talk to them about the colleagues they're going to be working with, discuss the cultural differences of this property and location as compared to others, and help them with







securing a visa and accommodations. Once they arrive, there are orientations and regular meetings with HR and others to ensure things are transitioning smoothly. However, one of the ways we make sure a new employee is indeed making an effort themselves to integrate is by giving them a questionnaire after the first six weeks. How many hotels are there in the group? What are our pillars? What is our vision statement? Who is our CEO? And who are our most regular guests? If somebody could not provide that information after six weeks, that person has not made enough of an effort to settle in.

## MANAGING, THEN AND NOW

Twenty years ago, guests checked in, guests checked out, and you focused on service. As long as people paid their bill, you could successfully run a hotel. Today, if you don't understand the legal aspect, the pace of technology, digital marketing, public affairs, and how to work with owners and shareholders, you cannot run a hotel successfully. It has become much more complex, and there is now even more pressure on a general manager to have a sophisticated management capability.



At the same time, a lot of industry changes make our life much easier in many ways. Our owners support us. Social media gives us many new ways to reach target markets. Legislation has made a lot of things more transparent and competition more honest. Every coin has two sides. I think there are not more challenges, just different challenges.

#### A FOCUS ON LOCAL

Not too long ago, guests wanted every hotel to look the same. It didn't matter where in the world you

were, you knew that you were at a certain kind of property. Today, the industry has evolved. People want to soak up part of the culture and have authentic, local experiences, design, and décor built into the property. Mandarin Oriental is uniquely positioned for that, and I think, for a very long time, was already in the business of creating hotels that played an important role within the society, before it became fashionable to have cultural influences as a marketing tool or as a way to attract guests.

## A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

In redesigning our 120 suites at The Landmark, Mandarin Oriental, we took a very deliberate approach to understanding every aspect of the effort. We thought long and hard about who we're building these rooms for, where they live, how they communicate, and what do they really want. We identified travelers for leisure and for business, experienced and inexperienced, personalizing the details. We pushed ourselves, and now these rooms are as much a destination as the hotel itself. Designer Joyce Wang became an overnight celebrity, and now she's renovating the Mandarin Oriental, Hyde Park in London, among other places.

## CLASSIC HOSPITALITY

Some things will never be out of fashion. It's always good to have a really great doorman. It's always nice when somebody smiles and uses your name. It's always nice to have somebody ask you whether you're satisfied, then offer you more. It's always nice for somebody to thank you, to wish you a good journey, and to hope you can come back soon. These are very old-fashioned efforts, but twenty years from now, they will still be valued.

## BEYOND THE SPA

I believe wellness will start evolving outside of the spa. There will be wellness elements in the room, such as a higher quality mattress, chemical-free amenities, and 100 percent pure air. There will also be healthier choices in the minibars. Giving guests a choice is important, but I think they will naturally lead a more healthy life in the future. Wellness will no longer be confined to going to the spa for a treatment, but something that is integrated throughout the rooms and hotel at large.

## A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY

If somebody is coughing when they check in, offer them some tea with honey when you escort them to the room. If someone seems jetlagged or exhausted, ask them when their next meeting is, and if they want to sleep. If so, you are happy to turn on the Do Not Disturb sign and notify the front desk not to put any calls through. For a tired and frustrated guest, that kind of empathy and attention to detail is music to their ears. It doesn't have to be grand gestures. Even seemingly small efforts can really touch the heart of your guest.





"... an enlightening read, intelligently written, and comprehensive in its reflection, culminating in an impressive, long-overdue publication of this nature and magnitude."

—Dr. Dimitrios Diamantis, Dean of Graduate Studies,  
Les Roches, Global Hospitality Education, Switzerland

In *A Wealth of Insight*, more than thirty-five of the world's best luxury hoteliers share exactly what it takes to lead and manage some of the most legendary hotels and resorts. Each executive profile includes bite-size insights, stunning photography and real-life examples on recruiting, culture, technology, marketing, branding, personalization, authenticity, anticipation, design, partnerships and more. Hoteliers also detail the most significant trends impacting the sector today, and how those trends will shape the future of luxury hospitality. The sheer scale and scope of this effort—to distill industry wisdom across two dozen countries—is unprecedented.

For aspiring and current general managers of luxury hotels, for hospitality executives in search of a practical guide on how best to deliver a world-class guest experience, and for the modern luxury traveler eager to go behind the scenes, *A Wealth of Insight* is the holy grail of five-star leadership and management.



**RAHIM B. KANANI** is a leadership, luxury, and travel contributor to a number of global publications including *Forbes Middle East* and *Black Truffle Club*. Over the years, he has interviewed more than 500 of the world's most innovative, influential, and award-winning executives on leadership, management, and creativity. Notable interviewees have included billionaires Jeff Skoll, Michael Bloomberg, Tory Burch and Eli Broad,

world-renowned chefs Eric Ripert, Daniel Humm, José Andrés, and Anthony Bourdain, musical artists Alicia Keys, Madonna, and Shakira, Hollywood filmmaker James Cameron, Harvard University President Drew Faust, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Princess Ameerah Al-Taweel of Saudi Arabia. During this time, he served as a leadership contributor to *Forbes* and *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, while also authoring or editing articles and interviews published in *Harvard Business Review*, *CNN Opinion*, *Financial Times*, *Fast Company*, *Food & Wine*, and others.

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