

A luxurious learning

Four Seasons is the embodiment of Service Excellence. Dedicated to perfecting the travel experience with their elegant surroundings, round-the-clock personal service, and attentive staff, they represent the highest standards in hospitality. Their associates are inextricably bound and inspired by their singular focus on living the Four Seasons culture. For those travelers who know and appreciate the very best, Four Seasons offers a true home-away-from-home experience.

Founded in 1960, Four Seasons has 74 hotels in 31 countries, with more than 25 new properties currently under development. They have charted and adhered to a purposeful expansion strategy, targeting major cities and desirable resort destinations around the world. Admirably, they have melded growth with innovation, constantly defining new ways to make business travel easier, and leisure travel more memorable.

Opened in 1987, the Four Seasons Hotel Los Angeles is located in a quiet palm-lined residential neighborhood of Beverly Hills, just minutes from the elegant shopping district on Rodeo Drive. The hotel exudes luxury, but with a relaxed California ambience. Known for their impeccable service, the staff exhibits a dedication to the Four Seasons culture that you see in everyone, everywhere, and at every time.

I first stayed there in the early stages of considering a sales incentive trip in which the winners would attend the Rose Bowl in 1989. That planning trip was the first time I met some Four Seasons associates: Mehdi Eftekari, Carol Watkins, Ephrem, Dale Brunner and Dana Bronson, most of who were on site when the hotel first opened at that location.

I recall being impressed with every person's awareness of and respect for their culture; it governed the hotel. More remarkable is the way in which they lived the Four Seasons company culture, but refined and adapted that culture to accommodate their high-profile and demanding guests who sought a casual environment. I have had the pleasure of returning to this hotel many times in the past decade, and that devotion to their culture is even truer today.

Recently, I had the opportunity to discuss the notion of "owning a culture" with some of the hotel's long-term associates. In particular, I was impressed with the way in which their culture appeared to grow stronger as the hotel matured, and asked for their perspective on how this had evolved. Sarah Cairns, the Four Seasons' Director of Public Relations, observed that "120 of our 550 associates have been here since we opened. That's remarkable, isn't it?"

Building on that thought, Carol Watkins, the Director of Entertainment Sales, explained "With that many people who have been here from the start, our culture has strengthened with the passage of time. We are successful because we know how to communicate with one another. Each of us has a great sense of ownership in the culture, and we have learned to be certain that an individual's part in the service experience is perfect and supportive of one another."

Emphasizing the importance of communication, Carol added that “Everyone trusts everyone else to deliver their part of the service experience. All that is required is clear, direct communications.” To illustrate this point, Carol shared a recent exchange she’d had with Avi, the Food and Beverage Manager, which is now coined “The Wasabi Pea Intervention.”

“I called Avi, and asked if we could get some of the wasabi peas we used to have as bar snacks. I shared that my client, Nicolette, loved them and would be coming to the hotel in a few days.

“Avi explained that the hotel had stopped carrying the peas, since the distributor required a 25-case minimum purchase, far in excess of their demand. So, he said it would be much easier for him to run to Bristol Farms (a local grocer) and buy them there.

“I replied that Nicolette was dreaming about these wasabi peas, so having someone buy them at Bristol Farms was a great idea, and I thanked him.

“Avi’s reply? Done!”

Like a complex machine, everyone, everywhere, at every time has a specific individual contribution to the total service experience. Clear communications and trust ensure a well-oiled machine. These owners and champions of the culture at Four Seasons LA understand the connectivity that each has to the whole. Ephrem (who goes by one name) and Dale Brunner have both been with the hotel since its opening.

Ephrem, the most senior bellman, takes his role very seriously. “I am responsible for first impressions,” he explains. “In most instances, I am the first person to greet our guests upon arrival, and the last person to bid our guests goodbye upon departure.

“I need to be certain all of our guests feel welcome, at home, and comfortable in their rooms. I am also the first problem solver if the room, the view, or the location does not meet a guest’s expectations. As I get them settled, or assist in their departure, I listen carefully for information that should be communicated to others on our staff; anything that will be helpful for this or future stays.”

Dale Brunner is a server in Gardens, the Four Seasons’ fine dining restaurant. Dale is the most superb professional server I have encountered in all my years of traveling and dining out. His restaurant is frequented by hotel guests, but also by a number of “regulars” who live and work locally. Dale truly enjoys his work, and takes seriously the role he plays in their guests’ overall experience. His unwavering commitment to Service Excellence has earned Dale recognition as “Employee of the Month” many times over, and he is the only associate at this location to have twice been awarded the honor of “Employee of the Year.”

Dale began our conversation about how he does, what he does by saying, “I consider it a privilege to serve guests in this magnificent environment. This culture is truly wonderful and I have learned a tremendous amount just from working with such fine people these past 20 years. I have been taught so much by the Four Seasons, its culture, and our guests that, with the passage of time, I truly believe I have come to live my entire life as a better person. The Four Seasons’ way of life – how we treat one another and our guests – has become my way of life, all the time.”

Dale talked about understanding the needs of his guests this way: “Everyone is different, so I always try to understand, even anticipate, what will make their experience most memorable. Sure, they all need a great meal; that’s what our restaurant provides. But each guest has other needs that must be considered. That is why ‘how’ I serve them matters greatly to them and to me. I seek perfection with every service encounter.”

Finally, Dale expanded on something he calls “glitch recovery” and what Carol Watkins referred to as “saving the day.” Every associate has been trained to be sensitive to problems, instructed to communicate them broadly, empowered to do whatever it takes to immediately resolve a problem in favor of the guest, and recover the positive experience.

Confirming that “glitch recovery” or “saving the day” is indeed pervasive at Four Seasons, Dana Bronson discussed this concept with me at length. Dana is the Director of Entertainment, who has also been with the hotel since its opening in 1987. He is an outside contractor who, for the past 20 years, has arranged music programs for guests and local residents every Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

“From the earliest days, our philosophy has been that people want to relax and enjoy live entertainment – not something ‘piped in’. That supports our culture, doesn’t it? It is all about personal interactions.”

Dana went on to talk about the importance of ownership and how, when a situation occurs that may develop into a bad experience for a guest, everyone is trained to take ownership of the situation and see it through to a satisfactory conclusion; they are not to hand it off to someone else. He cited three interesting illustrations of what he describes as “ownership recovery”:

“So often a band is selected to perform at a wedding reception but, with the ceremony, the music itself has been overlooked. I get a last minute call from the hotel, and off I go with music book in hand, and two of my colleagues who are on-call, to form an instant classical ensemble.”

Dana’s second illustration involved another wedding, where he overheard a request the couple were making for a silk pillow for the ceremony. “I stepped in, let them know I had just received three white silk pillows as a gift, and went home to get one for their ceremony – thus, saving their day!”

One of Dana's most memorable experiences began at midnight on a Sunday; the quietest night in the hotel business. He received a phone call from the hotel's restaurant manager requesting that Dana come immediately to the hotel saying, "Frank Sinatra is coming here from a televised taping of his 80th birthday celebration, and he wants to cap off the night with some music and close friends."

Dana was exhausted; he had been in a recording studio all day and playing at a private party all evening. "I thought he was kidding and I went back to sleep. But 15 minutes later the hotel manager called again, saying that Mr. Sinatra was due to arrive and where was I?"

"I quickly put on a suit and headed to the hotel. When I arrived, there was Frank Sinatra by the piano with Tony Bennett, Steve Lawrence, Eydie Gorme, Gregory Peck and a few others, all waiting to hear me play some old songs."

"Where the hell have you been?" asked Mr. Sinatra.

Dana played piano until 3:30 in the morning, while Frank Sinatra recounted stories about each of the songs he played. Not only was the night saved, but it was magical for a very special guest.

Dana summarized our conversation, sharing thoughts that were sounding more and more familiar as I gathered people's stories. "I have played in many venues and for many different types of crowds. Nothing compares to the experience of this hotel. Everyone works as a team to be certain the guest experience is always the best it can be. We are successful because all of us on the team work together at owning the guest experience."

Mehdi Eftekari, the Four Seasons LA General Manager, eloquently shared his personal commitment to living their culture, and responsibility for its' nurturing.

"The overall structure of the culture is set by the Four Seasons. The General Manager and staff at a particular location then go about understanding the needs of that location's guests so they can adopt and refine the culture further, in order to blend in with the local environment.

"When I first joined the Four Seasons just after Los Angeles opened, I was overwhelmed by the power of the culture that was taking form, from the very outset. The associates, who were here seven months before me, made my welcome very comfortable and pleasant."

Mehdi believes that the tone for the culture begins with him. He is the role model for all associates and guests. He knows all of the associates, and as much about their families as possible. He makes it his ongoing responsibility to get to know as many of the guests as he can, especially those who remain loyal and continue to return. This hotel has a remarkable loyalty return rate of 60%, exceptionally high in the hospitality industry.

One of Mehdi's considerable obligations to the culture is assuring that new associates who join the company will be a fit. He personally interviews every new hire, and is the final of five interviewers who meet with each applicant. He does not focus on the new hire's role at the hotel; he is only concerned with "how" they will do, what they will do.

"When I meet a potential new hire, I try to understand the passion they will have for serving our guests. I judge how well they communicate, how well they will represent the Four Seasons and, most importantly, how well they will fit within our culture."

Mehdi takes his responsibility as "caretaker of the culture" very seriously. He is wholly appreciative of the role everyone, everywhere plays in his hotel. He recognizes that every time an associate interacts with a guest, there is the potential for a shortfall in Service Excellence. But, if they bring the right people into the culture, those who demonstrate the traits to "recover," the culture will endure just as it has for the past twenty years at this magnificent location.

Hotels in the hospitality industry all provide accommodations, banquet space, meeting rooms and restaurants; what they do is very similar. But how they do, what they do can be a differentiator and the bridge to loyalty. The Four Seasons Los Angeles at Beverly Hills has achieved excellence in both *what* they do, and *how* they do it. Try it the next time you are in Los Angeles