

To train or not to train?



Last January I was invited to present at the annual conference of the Irish Accommodation Services Institute (IASI). My brief was very specific. I was to speak on “Standards of Excellence within the Accommodation Sector”. Being passionate about standards and all that they represent, this was music to my ears. The challenge, however, was that as I had spoken on this topic many, many times over the life of IASI and indeed its predecessor, the Association of Hotel Accommodation Management (AHAM) how was I going to ensure a fresh perspective? How was I to avoid looking at glazed eyes? Thus began the necessary research which led me to Canadian Hotels. In late 2012, CBCs Marketplace tested 54 hotel rooms in Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto across six of Canada’s biggest hotel chains. The hotels represented budget options, mid-range and high-end. In October 2013 Marketplace retested those same hotels this time reducing the number of rooms to 9. The rooms were tested for general cleanliness and for a variety of germs that cannot be detected without the aid of a microbiological testing kit. There was also a hidden camera installed to record working practices.

The findings did not make for pleasant reading. Faults included:

- Dirty Sheets, reused pillowcases and, decorative throws and cushions that rarely get cleaned.
- MRSA –an antibiotic-resistant strain of Staphylococcus bacteria, was found on a variety of frequently touched surfaces in hotels including TV remotes, bathroom vanity unit and bedroom lamps.
- Visible mould growth on air vents
- Contaminated bathroom surfaces
- Dirty coffee maker & cups
- Dust/dirt on ‘phones, wardrobes and TVs

Some of the work practices noted and clearly visible in the accompanying video ranged from carelessness as in walking on the bedding just stripped to some of the most unhygienic practices I have ever seen. I will spare you the details. The widespread cross-contamination revealed was attributed in part to the lack of proper equipment and insufficient use of sanitizers.

Each of the hotels tested were given an opportunity to respond. All expressed disappointment and spoke of regarding any breach of their standards and procedures to be a serious violation of their operating practices. They promised appropriate monitoring would be undertaken and that remedial training would be provided. Many were forced to review their cleaning policies, work practices, standards and supervisory inspections.

These findings raise some questions. How would we fare in Ireland if such tests were undertaken here? What would a hidden camera reveal of our work practices?

Every hotel talks, as these Canadian hotels did, about the paramount importance

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given to “the comfort, safety and well-being of our guests” but what does that mean in practice? What training is provided to new starts and thereafter? What refresher training is provided? What training has the supervisor or manager undertaken? The Gallup Organisation’s 1999 research and reiterated April 2014 suggest that “people may join a company because of its brand identity but how long they stay depends to a great extent on the quality of their manager”. Are the required standards clearly articulated, communicated and understood by all? Are they consistent or do they vary depending on the ability/interest of the person carrying out the task and that of the different managers or supervisors who undertake the checking? Do the required standards take the peaks & troughs into consideration or are they based on a five-day week necessitating making allowances for those busy days when

short cuts have to be taken due to insufficient equipment to meet the demands of a full house? What are penalties of regular deviation? What equipment and cleaning materials are provided? Some years ago while in the US, I used the opportunity to undertake some benchmarking. Visiting a well-known chain hotel, I asked to visit their onsite laundry. After a few hours working alongside the laundry manager I asked what cleaning cloths were used

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to clean and dry off baths, hand basins and toilet seats/covers. He said “we use the used towels that the guest has left in the rooms and before you say anything I can assure you they are then sterilised through a high temperature wash before putting back into stock”. My reaction was then, as it is now, equally concerned with the “nooks and crannies on which that towel had been used by the guest before being used to dry off the cleaned surface.

Other questions relate to the frequency of washing or dry-cleaning of those throws & cushions? How are the other non-daily tasks scheduled? What provision has been made for these non-daily expenditures in the budget? Is the room glassware & crockery washed in a dishwasher? If so where is the dishwasher located? Does the house-assistant have to make several trips to the kitchen or is it located adjacent to their work?

And what about the staff:room ratio? How many rooms does each house-assistant clean or is the supervisor expected to check? Hair-raising stories abound of situations where house-assistants are expected to clean anything from between 18-30 rooms per day. And that irrespective of the conditions in which the guest left the rooms not to mention room design & furnishings. Too few hotels consider labour demands when building or refurbishing. One of those hotels who take these factors into consideration is Novotel: they believe that guest appeal is not the only consideration. Rooms should be cheap to construct and cheap to maintain. Every

single aspect of the bedroom is taken into consideration in terms of its cleaning & labour intensity. Labour intensive items are redesigned, altered, simplified or enclosed. It was in Novotel that I first came across the Ergo bed-a bed that in pulling a lever, the bed comes out from the wall and is raised to waist level. This eliminates/reduces the backbreaking work that is bed -making. In addition, the plinth on the floor remains static thereby eliminating the task of looking under the bed for lost property. Many of the comments posted following the Marketplace research suggested that overwork takes its toll on cleanliness. So while the managers of the tested hotels stressed the need for training and or retraining of their staff, I would argue that training is not the panacea to all faults or guest complaints. Training in isolation of the set standards, the provision of correct and sufficient equipment will not provide the required return on investment. Training overworked staff will also lead to the demotivation of the most ardent. It hardly needs saying that overworked staff, irrespective of their professional ethos, will always take whatever short cuts are necessary to ensure their ability to pay their mortgage, educate their children or pay their ever- increasing utility bills. Am I ruling out training? Is training important? Without doubt, effective training will increase the effectiveness, confidence and profitability of staff, enhance the level of customer service and ensure repeat business making it a win-win for all. ○



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