

Spring 2011

# Exploring how Employee Empowerment Impacts on Hotel Front Desk Operations

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EXPLORING HOW EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT IMPACTS ON HOTEL FRONT DESK  
OPERATIONS

by

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2003

A professional paper submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

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May, 2011

## **Part One**

### **Introduction**

Helen has been working at a big resort hotel for over three years. She is quite competent at her job and knows what all of her responsibilities are and uses her knowledge and experience to handle her job in an efficient manner. Each and every day she experiences numerous problems as well as complaints from hotel guests which might include such things as incorrect billing from the use of the automated mini bars, problems with housekeeping services, malfunctions due to worn out room facilities, service delays and a hotel outlets' service shortfalls. For each of these examples, Helen must make a decision as to how to handle the specific problem or complaint. She is aware that there are long lines of guests in the lobby seeking front desk assistance and that her managers are busy with other tasks. As she resolves each one of these problems or complaints using her own judgement, she feels confident that the front desk managers will trust her decisions since they have empowered her with the knowledge to handle the job with confidence without having to seek their assistance for each and every problem.

As this example shows, empowering employees can increase their job satisfaction as well as boosting the efficiency and productivity of front desk operations. According to Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2009), it is a company's responsibility to give employees the tool needed to make decisions using their own common sense. In this way employees are able to use empowerment responsibly so that in most cases they will not have to involve their managers when dealing with everyday problems.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to show why empowerment is important to hotel front desk operations. This research will be accomplished through an examination of existing methods of empowerment which are practiced in hotels as compared to the best practices presented in research.

## **Statement of Objective**

This paper will not try to solve a specific problem, but will serve to provide a more exploratory look at how employee empowerment impacts on front desk operations. First, this paper will examine the existing empowerment practices used in hotels and how it works in the real business world. Secondly, the paper will discuss the impacts of empowerment in terms of increased productivity, employee retention (satisfaction), and service recovery.

## **Justification**

Examples of empowering employees can easily be viewed at hotel front desks in the hospitality industry since the front desk is the first and last contact of a guests' stay at a hotel. It is especially critical in the case of Mega-resort properties such as the Venetian/Palazzo and Wynn/Encore in Las Vegas that front desk services must be efficient and fast paced since they have almost 7000rooms and almost always have long lines waiting for front desk services. If front desk agents were to need to see a manager for every guest complaint or problem, entire procedures would be delayed and guests would have a very negative view of front desk operations and services. Indeed, employee empowerment is a well- known tool for retaining employees, boosting operation productivity and recovering customer services. Improper use of empowerment can also impact negatively on such things as employees' poor decision making

and management's fear of giving up control. However, employee empowerment has more positive impacts on the front desk operations and this paper will suggest how to overcome those negative aspects by showing the best practices used in hotel operations.

### **Constraints**

One of the main constraints in this study is the limited access to certain research materials that might be relevant to certain aspects of the importance of empowering employees at front desk operations. All of the research will be based on interviews with hotel professionals in successful resorts located in Las Vegas and the use of published literature.

### **Glossary**

Empowerment –

Empowerment is an idea which includes many disciplines and areas of study such as economics, community development, education, psychology, and studies of social movements and organizations, among others. According to the definition of *The World Bank*, empowerment is providing individuals or groups with enough knowledge to allow them to make educated choices so that the result of those choices leads to responsible decision making. Hopefully these decisions will not only benefit the individual making them but also the organization or company which allows the use of this empowerment.

Employee retention-

Employee retention refers to the methods used by employers to create and maintain a feeling of team spirit to encourage current employees to remain loyal to the company. These methods usually try to target the needs of the individual employee. The purpose is to avoid high

employee turnover which is a major cost for most business organizations. These costs include hiring and training expenses; reduced productivity, loss of customers and business and a possible lowering of morale among the remaining members of the workforce.

## **Part Two**

### **Introduction**

Employee empowerment has been shown to be the best method for achieving better hotel service, productivity, and efficiency as well as improving guest satisfaction (Sternberg, 1992, Feb). This is especially true for the Mega resorts on the Las Vegas Strip such as Wynn/Encore, Venetian/Palazzo and City Center Properties. These properties need employee empowerment at the Hotel Front Desk Operations. Some mega resorts have about 5000 to 7000 rooms and they have a limited number of management employees. If front desk agents need managers' assistance and approvals for each guest challenge, the hotel lobby will have long lines of people while they wait for services. Indeed, it will have a negative impact on customer service and front desk agents will be frustrated in performing their job. A hotel manager from one of the Las Vegas Resorts stated that "Employee empowerment plays a major role in the front desk operations, and I do not see any negative impact on our hotel. It helps front desk agents work efficiently at the front desk and I believe empowerment helps them make quick decisions, brings positive feedback from our guests and it brings us more repeat business." (personal communication, February 23, 2011).

### **The definition of empowerment**

What is empowerment? There are a lot of different definitions in books and journals, and online resources. Rappoport (1984) has said that it is easy to define empowerment when employees are not given any but on the other hand it is used differently in different organizations and in different ways by individuals so that it is also difficult to define. The concept of empowerment is still often debated. Zimmerman (1984) has mentioned that it is counterproductive to try to come up with a single definition of empowerment since the very idea

of empowerment is to apply it on an individual basis depending on the situation. The definition of empowerment according to *The World Bank*, is the methods used to provide groups or individuals with the information and tools needed to make responsible choices and decisions so that these choices will result in actions or decisions which will benefit both the individual and the company or organization. The individual will feel that he or she is part of the decision making process and the organization benefits by becoming more efficient and increasing its productivity.

The most comprehensive definition of empowerment in the literature can be found in Thomas and Velthouse's (1990) article entitled "Cognitive elements of empowerment: An 'interpretive' model of intrinsic task motivation". The definition they provide is:

To empower means to give power to. Power, however, has several meanings...authority, so that empowerment can mean authorization. . . .capacity. . . .However, power also means energy. Thus to empower also can mean to energize. This latter meaning best captures the present motivational usage of the term. Our perception is that the word empowerment has become popular because it provides a label for a nontraditional paradigm of motivation. . . .change [has] forced a search for alternative forms of management that encourage commitment, risk-taking, and innovation. . . .the newer paradigm involves relaxed (or broad) controls and an emphasis on internalized commitment to the task itself. . . .We use the word empowerment to refer to the motivational content of this newer paradigm of management. (p. 667)

### **Characteristics of employee empowerment and how it works**

The concept of empowerment can sometimes raise suspicions among managers since it requires them to change the way they think and do their jobs. This concept requires them to give up a portion of their control and authority while at the same time being accountable for their



actions and decisions. They must learn to trust their employees with some of their power and develop a respect for the decisions the employee makes. At the same time these managers must be willing to accept their new role and perhaps a decrease in their authority (Sternberg, 1992, Feb).

According to Page and Czuba (1999), the concept of empowerment has two parts. First, the group with the power can change. In other words, power can be shifted from one group to another. If the group with the power cannot change then of course you can't have any empowerment. When you can shift power from one group to the other then it is possible to implement the concept. Second, the concept of empowerment depends upon the idea that power can grow. This means that we shift power from one group to another and there will always be enough so that it can be shared among different groups so that empowerment can be effective.

Generally empowerment often does not occur because managers are unwilling to give up their power. In fact, the more they give up power, the more they get back in return, so empowerment enhances power. An empowered employee feels a sense of loyalty to manager who gave them power.

### **Importance of empowerment to operations**

Through the use of empowerment, hotel operations can help not only improve guest satisfaction, but it can also help increase employee productivity and efficiency. Employee empowerment can also provide employee satisfaction and help to retain the best employees.

Mallak and Kurstedt (1996), perhaps more articulately, express this sentiment when they write, "Managers who understand how empowerment integrates with organizational culture are motivated to lead employees...and help them internalize the values and traditions [of empowerment]. These managers help create a work environment where employees take action

for intrinsic reasons more so than for extrinsic reasons." (p. 8). Mallak and Kurstedt (1996) explained in their research how important the organization's culture is to the successful implementation of empowerment. So if an organization values and respects their employees, they will be able to implement various forms of empowerment because of the trust built up among team members. On the other hand if the organization operates on a culture of secrecy and distrust, empowerment will not work. Shipper and Manz (1992), describe how important empowerment is in the W.L. Gore and Associates' case study. Employees all have the same title and each one is provided with a person who can mentor and train them. When it is time to consider advancement and pay raises, they all can confer with a compensation committee. Even if an employee decides to look for a new job in the company they are encouraged so they feel they can advance and not be stuck in the same position. While these methods go much further than what other companies who are interested in empowering their employees might do, it does show what was successful at Gore and Associates. These ideas which have been instilled in this company come from its founder. Schein notes, "Founders usually have a major impact on how the group defines and solves its external adaptation and internal integration problems." (Schein, 1985, p. 210). Founders of companies can be so important that they can influence how the company operates long after they are gone.

The struggle for many employees is that they do not know what to do when empowered, since they have made very few decisions in their lives (both workplace and personal life). Therefore, some employees when given the chance to make decisions for themselves, are not able to see it as empowerment. They see it as an additional responsibility or burden. However, when these employees are given the proper tools and training needed to make decisions first, it can result in a positive experience with empowerment.

## The nature of front desk operations

The front desk is both the entrance and exit for all hotel guests in the hospitality industry. When guests arrive at a hotel, they must come to the front desk in order to check into their rooms and they also need other front desk services such as hotel information, a reservation change, or other inquiries during their stay. Guests also need to check out of their rooms, review their bills and correct any wrong charges at front desk. To do this, front desk operations require being open 24/7 with varied work shifts, including weekends and holidays.

If you were to view hotel employment websites, you would notice the requirements needed to be a front desk agent all show the need for abilities which show the nature of front desk operations.

**EXCEPTIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE**

**JOB TITLE:** AGENT - FRONT OFFICE

Job Code:		Travel Involved:	None
Work Schedule:	Varies	Job Type:	Full-Time Flex
Average Hours per Week:	Varies	Category:	Front Office

**Job Description:**

The Front Desk Agent sells and assigns rooms, registers guests, determines credit, renders bills, receives cash and credits payments and provides Unmatched Guest Service.

**Job Requirements:**

Minimum Employment Requirements: 18+ years of age, proof of eligibility to work in the United States, High School Diploma or equivalent, ability to communicate effectively in English both in oral and written form, interpersonal skills to deal effectively with all business contacts, maintain a professional, neat and well-groomed appearance adhering to VCR standards, work varied shifts, including weekends and holidays. Specific Job Requirements: Six months previous cash handling experience required, one year continuous face-to-face guest service experience required, previous Front Desk experience in a hotel/resort preferred, PC software programs (MS Word, Excel), basic typing skills, excellent guest service skills, maintain manual dexterity to access computer via computer keyboard and operate office equipment, physical ability to access all areas of the facility and withstand prolonged standing, stretching, bending and kneeling without restriction, work indoors and be exposed to various environmental factors such as, but not limited to CRT fatigue, noise, dust, cigarette smoke, work in a fast-paced, busy, and somewhat stressful environment and maintain physical stamina, proper mental attitude and ability to deal effectively with guests, management, employees and outside contacts while working under pressure and meeting deadlines.

## JOB REQUIREMENTS:

- One (1)+ year continuous guest service experience required; previous Front Desk experience in a hotel/resort is preferred.
- Previous cash handling experience is required.
- Computer experience and the ability to accurately type 25 wpm are required.
- Physical ability to access all areas of the facility and withstand prolonged standing, stretching, bending and kneeling without restriction.
- Work indoors and be exposed to various environmental factors such as, but not limited to CRT fatigue, noise, dust, cigarette smoke.
- High School Diploma or equivalent.
- Proof of eligibility to work in the United States.
- Must possess excellent guest service skills as well as interpersonal skills to deal effectively with all business contacts.
- Must be able to communicate effectively in English, in both written and oral forms, ability to communicate in other languages is preferred.
- Maintain professional, neat and well-groomed appearance adhering to MGM Grand standards.
- Work varied shifts, including weekends and holidays.

## Job details

Job 1 of 1

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<b>Position Title</b>	Front Desk Representative, Wynn Resort
<b>Job Description</b>	<p>The Guest Service Representative is responsible for all duties surrounding the Front Desk</p> <p>Job Responsibilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*Checking in/out guests</li><li>*Monitoring front desk phone center</li><li>*Revising in-house reservations</li><li>*Cashiering functions</li><li>*Resolving guest issues within limits of authority</li><li>*Coordinating guest wishes with concierge</li><li>*Adhering to Wynn Standards/Core Values and all policies and procedures</li></ul> <p>Job Requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*High school diploma or equivalent required</li><li>*Two years of customer service experience</li><li>*Minimum of one year front desk experience or equivalent position</li></ul>
<b>Division</b>	2 - Hotel
<b>Location</b>	Wynn Las Vegas
<b>Pay Type</b>	Hourly
<b>Area</b>	Hotel

As you can see, these websites use words such as, “Fast-paced”, “Busy”, and “Stressful”. Therefore, it is crucial that Front desk managers need to hire candidates who are able to stand on their feet for long periods of time, maintain a positive attitude when dealing with the multitude of problems they face from guests, while at the same time dealing with management, and coworkers while working under pressure. In addition, empowerment must work well in this kind of a high pressure environment. An executive hotel manager of a Las Vegas resort pointed out that front desk operations need employee empowerment because of the special nature of the front desk and it helps a lot in terms of operational efficiency and customer service. However, she mentioned that employee empowerment needs to be implemented only after proper training so that front desk agents know what they can and cannot do (personal communication, February 17, 2011).

### **Empowerment cases related to front desk operations**

Front desk employees experience many complaints from hotel guests in regard to such things as incorrect billing from the use of automated mini bars, housekeeping services, malfunctions from worn out room facilities, service delays and a hotel outlets' service shortfalls. For examples, empowerment cases can be seen in customer reviews on online travel websites such as Tripadvisor, Travelocity, and Hotels.com. A review from Tripadvisor shows that a guest did not get the type of room which was requested at booking due to the fact that the king bed room was sold out. The front desk agent offered a discounted upgrade rate for the inconvenience experienced by the guest. Another case involved a guest that checked into a dirty suite and was upset because the room was not ready for check in. The front desk agent offered the guest a suite change with a complementary upgrade without hesitance and without the need for seeing a manager.

In the real business world, many complaints of incorrect billing may come from such things as the mini bar because it is an automated system and it can result in charges even though guests picked up items and put them back without using them. At check out, hotel guests often argue with front desk agents regarding these mini bar charges. The front desk agent sometimes must call the mini bar department to check in-room inventory if a guest disputes a large amount of a mini bar charge, however, they usually try not to take a long time to handle it or the front lobby will form a long line of guests waiting for front desk services. Most managers allow mini bar disputes to be handled by front desk agents as long as they follow the front office procedures.

Another frequent dispute involves the daily resort fee. Guests do not understand why they must pay for local and toll free calls, the use of unlimited in-suite internet access, a charge for daily newspapers and use of the hotel fitness center. At check in or check out, these dispute invariably involve the front desk. Some guests say they were not told about the resort fee when they booked the hotel rooms, others will say the front desk agent did not explain the resort fee at check in even though guests signed for it at check-in. When front desk agents encounter these challenges at the front desk, they try to use their empowerment to resolve these issues while always following proper hotel procedures. Indeed, many hotels use the Property Management System (PMS) such as LMS, Fidelio, or Opera. These are operating systems which allow front desk employees to make internal notations regarding why they offered compensation for guests and what happened when dealing with guests. As stated above, a hotel manager mentioned that front desk agents can use their empowerment to make quick and effective decisions for offering compensation during a guest stay, which helps not only front desk agents but also front office operations provide better guest service (personal communication, February 23, 2011).

For example, many hotels collect a guests' email address at booking or check in which hotels use to send feedback emails using such programs as UniFocus or questionnaires to hotel guests after check out ([www.unifocus.com](http://www.unifocus.com)). UniFocus allows a guest to rate the entire property on such things as housekeeping, restaurants, casino, and front desk service. Each department is then rated weekly and for the entire month. Examples of ratings for front desk operations might include the following:

1. Accurate reservations upon check-in
2. Courteous check-in
3. Courteous check-out
4. Made me feel welcome
5. Provided personalized service
6. Timely check-in (5-7 minutes)
7. Timely check-out (5-7 minutes)
8. Accurate billing upon check-out

These ratings are calculated by percentage each week of the month and it affects a hotel's ratings including Forbes' star ratings and the American Automobile Association (AAA)'s diamonds ratings. Hotel guests use these feedback mails to rate and comment on the service they received at the various properties they visited. For example, a front desk agent took a long time to verify which mini bar items that they used, or they had bad housekeeping services but the front desk did not compensate them in any way, or the front desk does not seem efficient since they waited in long lines before getting services. According to Forbes Travel Guide or AAA's service standards, a secret evaluator or inspector recommends that the transaction time with a front desk agent should be handled within a five minute period. According to a hotel manager

from a resort hotel in Las Vegas, they do not know when or who one of these inspectors will shop their properties and they do indeed time how long it takes for check-in and check-out. Also these inspectors have their own service standards and a front desk agent needs to hit each service point in a timely manner (Personal communication, Feb 17, 2011). Therefore, the front desk operation must be careful of its line management in the lobby which cannot be prompt and efficient without employee empowerment.

### **Best practices in hotel operations**

This part will show the best empowerment practices found in hotel operations from examples in other hotels. Tom Baum and Peter Odgers(2001) studied benchmarking and the best practices found in hotel front offices in Western Europe. They mentioned that these best practices related to hotel front offices is difficult to explain because of the hospitality industry's unique characteristic, in other words, that is the diversity. They said it is a hard task to identify individual best practice and come up with standards because different hotels have different standards which they follow. This applies to both Europe and the United States. The US Lodging Report (1999) defines Best Practice as any way of doing things which can be applied to other organizations in the same industry. So things that benefit one organization and work well in others would be considered "Best Practice".

The results of such empowerment can be positive, as shown by the following examples, drawn from several hotels (Sternberg, 1992, Feb):

In Hotel A, Front-office clerks were empowered to change a guest's bill in any amount if the guest disputed the charges. They discovered that when this was done, the result was that there were fewer changes in the long run. At the same time the guests made many positive comments about the service and treatment they received at the front desk. In



Hotel B, when guests complained of a lack of hot water or malfunctioning electrical equipment, members of the hotel's engineering staff were given the power to compensate the guests by actually comping their room. Again guest comments were positive which resulted in favorable feelings from the guests. This also had a positive effect on the engineers whose morale improved. At Hotel C, housekeepers were empowered to notify the front desk to change the status of completed rooms to "ready for occupancy" without prior inspection by a housekeeping manager. This allowed guests to occupy their rooms more quickly and room-inspection scores rose.

Other examples of hotel best practices can be found in *the Cornell Hotel & Restaurant Administration Quarterly* (1992, Feb) shows the best practices in hotel operations.

1. At one hotel an executive housekeeper was able to show the hotel's management that she could save eight hours of her time each week (over 400 hours per year) and improve service if the hotel provided her with beepers. When a guest or other employees called her for housekeeping services she no longer had to leave the desk to find the proper employee but could now contact that employee from her desk without leaving it. Without the beepers she had to waste time to find the proper employee to handle the request. Now she could just call.

2. In another hotel, the controller showed management that the hotel could save \$27,000 per year by purchasing new equipment that cost less than \$200. The problem was that housekeepers' keys were scratching the bathtubs during cleaning. The solution was key caddies to prevent the scratches and end the need for repairs to the tubs.

3. By simply installing a sink in an individual's work area one property saved \$25,000 per year. Stained napkins and linens no longer had to be replaced. One inexpensive sink allowed laundry workers to pre-soak the linens, thereby preventing stains from setting.
4. One hotel's human-resources director came up with a method for generating an additional 25 room-service covers per week through an inexpensive merchandising tactic. The hotel property included a number of condominiums, the owners of which parked in the hotel's parking garage. The merchandising tactic was to put special room-service flyers on the windshields of the condo owners' cars.
5. In another case, a sales manager suggested that if the hotel empowered her hotel's account executives to send VIP amenities to prospects on their own signature instead of requiring three signatures from other managers, more than 600 hours of selling time could be freed up.

While the above examples do not apply directly to front desk operations, they do show that empowerment can lead to tremendous savings to hotels, and that empowerment encourages employees to come up with ideas that improve all aspects of hotel operations. For example, the Venetian/Palazzo holds "Coffee meeting" monthly to encourage employees to come up with ideas to improve front desk services.

### **Empowerment and business**

Empowerment adds to the bottom line of front office operations. As the study shows, employee empowerment helps not only front desk operations' efficiency and productivity, it also improves its employees' job satisfaction which impacts on employee retention. Retaining employees and reducing employee turnover is a major expense for all hotels. In an interview with a front desk agent in a hotel, she mentioned that the front desk can be a fun and interesting

job since she can meet different guests from all around the world, but it can also be stressful due to its unique working environment of being fast-paced and being under constant pressure. Therefore, she would be unable to handle her job if management did not allow her to make decisions when handling guest challenges. In this manner, she can solve guest challenges efficiently with confidence and she is able to feel that between staff and management there is a circle of trust (personal communication, February 23, 2011).

However, employee empowerment has the potential to be abused by both hotel guests and employees. Add to this management which might be afraid of losing their control over staff level employees. Building trust between staff level employees and management can be a hard task due to the diverse workforce in front desk operations. Nevertheless, front desk operations can overcome these negative aspects and their solution will be shown in this paper's conclusion.

## **Conclusion**

As this study shows, employee empowerment is an important practice to both employees and employers. Empowering employees helps effectiveness, productivity, and employee job satisfaction. In addition, empowerment sometimes helps to improve operation procedures and to save operational costs. Due to the unique characteristic of front desk operations, empowerment can most easily be put in place in front desk operations.

To apply this empowerment effectively in front desk operations, management must demonstrate that they value their team members, that they trust people to make decisions, teach people to make decisions and they can delegate authority while providing proper guidance to their team members, and help their employees feel rewarded when successfully using their empowerment.

## **Part Three**

### **Introduction**

Employee empowerment is widely used in hotel front desk operations, and the impact of employee empowerment cannot be overlooked. As this study shows, empowerment makes front desk operations more productive, more democratic, and contributes to a more secure workplace. In fact, the concept of empowerment can be associated with Total Quality Management (TQM), and employee empowerment has been an important management tool for about two decades (Doughty, 2004). In the business world, TQM usually refers to every tool used by management to continuously improve the quality of an organizations products and services. Empowerment can do many things since employees must be able to make the necessary decisions to deal with guest complaints, and be allowed to suggest ways to improve service without feeling that their suggestions will not be listened to (Stevens, 1993). Empowerment also can be implemented when both employee and management believe that they need each other for the efficient operation of the organization. Management must understand that employees are their most valuable asset.

### **Challenges**

Even though employee empowerment plays an important role in hotel front desk operations, there are some negative aspects when empowering personnel. First of all, managers may tend to avoid empowerment due to their fear of losing power and at the same time they may distrust employees to use empowerment correctly. Doughty (2004) mentioned that most of the objections to employee empowerment comes from middle- level managers who think that their positions of authority will be threatened. He found that upper-level management felt less threatened by empowering employees. Middle –level managers sometimes feel that this will put

more demands on them and their staff numbers may be reduced (Doughty, 2004). Managers may also argue that employees have limited knowledge, so that they are not able to see the “big picture.” Doughty (2004) pointed out that “Their (employees) limited perspective and expertise is likely to contribute to disastrously short-sighted and narrowly self-interested choices” (Doughty, 2004). For example, new front desk agents and new front desk managers are not familiar with the nature of a new workplace and they will not be able to immediately perceive what they can and cannot do when dealing with guest complaints.

Secondly, it is difficult to train employees for the proper use of empowerment. Normally empowerment is implemented based on an individual’s common sense. Zhao (2009) studied the idea of using common sense from the point of view of a manager and how that common sense was used to make decisions. He did this to see how he could better use the idea of common sense to make better decisions. He found that common sense might mean different things to different people so that what one person believed was sensible might be seen by someone else as showing a lack of common sense. Zhao stated that individuals developed their idea of common sense through their individual experiences (Zhao, 2009). In fact, the front desk has a diverse workforce having different cultures, education, and work experience. Therefore, the subjective nature of common sense naturally makes the training difficult and it is impossible to train someone who has different backgrounds and personalities to make the right decisions on daily basis when in fact the problems that they have to deal with also change each and every day.

In addition, no amount of training will be able to change employees’ perceptions since they have been carrying those habits, ways of thinking and knowledge their entire life.

Finally, empowerment can be abused by both employees and guests. Due to the nature of the hotel industry, front desk agents are constantly dealing with rude and impatient guests during

their work shift. Indeed, some guests are always “fishing for comps” which means that they push the front desk personnel in order to get compensation for their inconveniences during their stay. They may make up stories or try different front desk agents to get the maximum compensation that they can (personal communication, February 23, 2011). Because of this, front desk agents may use their empowerment inappropriately just because they want to get away from difficult guests, even though they should be using empowerment at front desk operations with the proper paper work and procedures. A hotel manager of a resort in Las Vegas stated that it is difficult to say “There are limitations for empowerment”. She stated that using empowerment differs from case to case because the front desk has different challenges and guests on a daily basis (personal communication, February 23, 2011).

The biggest challenge can be to just say “NO” in the hospitality industry. Even though front desk personnel may deal with demanding or intoxicated guests, and some who ask for things which do not make sense, it is difficult to say “NO” in the hospitality industry. Indeed, a resort hotel on the strip in Las Vegas has a specific “Standards of Service” which says that “NO” is not an option, and team members must offer guests alternatives. Many hotels care about their hotels’ ratings and monitor UniFocus scores which affect a hotel’s rating. Especially now with the economy in a recession and social media over the internet affecting the hospitality market, word of mouth and blogging are becoming important marketing tools. Therefore, accommodating and solving guests’ problems during their stay can be a difficult task for front desk personnel.

On the other hand, Scully (1993) argues that employees might feel that management just says that they believe in TQM and employee empowerment but in reality most decisions are made by management and that employees really don’t have a say in the decision making process

(Scully, 1993). In many organizations, they still believe in this traditional labor division which is the real reason why managers don't want to delegate the decision making process to their employees. Scully (1993) also mentioned that to some people delegating authority is really a form of indirect control. Moreover, Stevens (1993) pointed out that some lower level managers look on empowerment as abandoning their responsibility and that could lead to a kind of anarchy in the organization.

### **Recommendations for Implementation of Empowerment**

According to Hollander and Offerman, the practice of employee empowerment came from the general principle of participative management (Hollander, E., & Offerman, L, 1990). They stated that its purpose is to accomplish a positive link between employee participation and job satisfaction, motivation and performance, personal commitment and corporate achievement. Organizational entrepreneur Johan Olsson (1996) mentioned that employee empowerment involves simple but important changes in managerial attitudes.

“Ask and listen,” he says. “Instead of providing your thoughts, ask the employee four business altering words: ‘What would you do?’ When you do ask this question, the employee has the opportunity to openly express ideas, dreams and passions. You may already have an answer, but if the answer comes from the employee you now have:

- delegated this opportunity to someone passionate about the issue;
- a champion within the business to lead the implementation and change ;
- an employee who is making a difference to the business.”

For him, the result is “a win-win situation.... You win by delegating, the business wins by improving processes and, most importantly, the employee feels like the primary winner because they have the opportunity to implement their own ideas to an issue and bring about resolution.”

It is important to perceive two concepts in this approach: first, empowerment is not about power; second, empowerment is about productivity.

As Olsson(1996) suggested, front desk operations can implement his principles. First of all, management has to delegate their responsibilities to those front desk agents who are interested in the issues which arise at the front desk operations. Some hotels have “Mentor Programs”, where the front desk agent becomes the mentor of new hires or those agents who need more training. This will help front desk operations in terms of initial and follow-up training. Secondly, management can select a motivated employee from within front desk operations to lead all implementations and changes. Indeed, some hotels have a “Lead Agent Program”, from which management appoints those front desk personnel who are willing to assume managers’ duties, and empowers them to solve guest’s complaints. It can be an effective way to give front desk agents managerial experience which helps them advance in their hospitality careers. Lastly, management can select an employee who he feels can make a difference to front desk operations. In order to do it, management must encourage employees not to fear or hesitate to express their own opinions and to encourage an “easy-to-talk” culture. This may include monthly, bi-monthly or on demand meetings between management and staff level employees. The key is building trust between employees and management. For example, the Venetian and Palazzo have monthly “Coffee Meetings” among employees. At these meetings they are encouraged to discuss complaints as they pertain to management, make



suggestions for operational improvement, or anything important to front desk operations. At one such meeting a front desk agent suggested the use of a “pre-coded room key” which allows guests who check in before their rooms are available to avoid having to return to the front desk for key pick up. An executive hotel manager stated that this new procedure reduces the long line of guests who pick up room keys, and it saves an enormous amount of labor and time (personal communication, February 17, 2011).

In addition, managers need to establish specific criteria for empowerment. For example, empowerment cases need to be monitored by management. Indeed, many hotels’ executives watch guest compensation cases since the daily report is generated by the Property Management System. Of course, building trust between employees and management is the main key to empowering employees, but as this study shows, empowerment can be abused by guests and front desk personnel. Mahoney, McMillan (1994) believed that the empowerment process could only work if there was a genuine two way communication between management and employees. If this is truly the case, then the full potential of the employee could be used for the benefit of the organization. So employers must treat their employees the way they would want to be treated themselves (Johnson, 1993). Moreover, employees can make mistakes, so management must understand that employees may not have proper solutions to guest complaints, but they cannot be punished for wrong decisions when using empowerment.

Lastly, special training can be implemented for using empowerment such as situation training. What is situation training? Advanced coaching Education website, *acecoach.com* defines that Situation Training is a practical application of the international coaching trend called the Game-based approach. It allows players to learn the tactics and techniques required for successful play in real-life situations. By learning with Situation Training, players can be fully

equipped to play the game (Elderton, 2008). All the cycle of components required for successfully playing a shot can be trained:

- Identify the situation you are in (tactical awareness)
- Know what you want to do (tactical intention)
- Select the most effective response (decision-making)
- Perform the best shot for the situation (biomechanically efficient and effective technique)
- Recover to the best spot for the next shot

This definition and tactics are used in tennis training, however, it has the same fundamentals as handling guest's complaints, and it can be implemented in front desk operations.

1. Front desk agents need to be aware of guests' problem (Listening is the most important part).
2. Front desk agents should know what he/she can do by using empowerment.
3. Offer the most effective solution to complaints.
4. Make sure the best solution is offered for the situation.
5. Follow up with the guest after offering solutions.

For example, newly opening hotels use Situation Training. These hotels may not have hot water, electricity or construction noise during a guest's stay. In addition, front desk agents may receive complaints regarding limited dining options since the hotels are not fully open. In such cases, the management can use this kind of training by putting front desk agents in this specific situation. Management trains employees how to take action and explains how far they can go in offering compensation when using empowerment. Since Situation Training relies upon Game-based approach, it will be able to be implemented in hotel front desk operations.

## **Conclusion**

Perception plays a major role in the hospitality industry. How a guest perceives a property can affect his or her entire stay at that property and result in repeat business for it. It is therefore essential and even critical that this perception be a positive one. As this study shows, aside from the physical appearance of the property, this positive perception is often formed at the front desk since it is often the first contact a guest has with hotel employees. The front desk agent therefore plays a major role in forming the guest's perception of the property. A negative experience here can be disastrous. Negative word of mouth about a property and negative internet blogs can result in a tremendous loss of business and revenue for a property. Everything must be done to ensure that this does not happen. Long lines and delays must be avoided during peak check-in and check-out procedures, complaints must be resolved quickly and services requested by a guest must be provided swiftly and efficiently. With the appearance of huge mega resorts which have thousands of rooms, this high quality of service would not be possible without giving the proper amount of empowerment to front desk agents.

The implementation of empowerment cannot begin without first building trust between employees and management. Secondly, employees must understand that they are responsible for how they use empowerment in each and every situation that arises at the front desk. Thirdly, management must be willing to give up some of their authority if empowerment is to work effectively. As this study shows, empowerment when used properly can lead to tremendous benefits for the property. This includes long term benefits such as repeat business, improved operating procedure and employee retention and engagement. Indeed, in the real business world, the cost of training new hires is significant. Empowerment which leads to improved employee retention can significantly reduce these costs.

This paper has shown why empowerment is important to hotel front desk operations and how empowerment works in the real business world and presented examples to illustrate it. Of course empowerment can have some negative impacts on front desk operations, however, as this study suggests in the recommendation section, they can be overcome. More research must be done in the area of front desk operations. While other areas of hotel operations have been widely researched such as food and beverage, casino operations and marketing, hotel front desk operations have not. All hospitality employees must keep in mind that since they already are knowledgeable in their own areas of expertise, it is important to coordinate this knowledge by engaging all the people in the organization. Again the hospitality business is all about the people.

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