



EMBASSY SUITES

# Rick's Report

Effective Methods in  
Attracting & Retaining  
Superior Team  
Members

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## EFFECTIVE METHODS IN ATTRACTING & RETAINING SUPERIOR TEAM MEMBERS

It's all about the team. Whether you are looking to fill open positions in an existing hotel, hire a new staff for a property soon to open or add talent at corporate headquarters, attracting and training, evaluating and retaining a top-notch team of individuals is necessary in order to be successful.

In doing so, we must select the right people for *our* needs; be clear and consistent in communicating goals and expectations; insure that all hires have the skills and authority to achieve assigned goals; and provide timely, constructive and fair feedback on performance as a basis for future compensation and promotion.

Our industry is seemingly dominated by technology, when we consider everything from computer-controlled building security and HVAC to automated payroll and accounting systems, Wi-Fi networks and online reservations. However, it only takes one guest in the lobby complaining about an unmade room or a discourteous team member to remind us that we are, first and foremost, a people business.

Without a doubt, the people that we recruit, train and form into what we expect to be an energetic, responsive, talented and mutually supportive team are a key element in our overall revenues, profitability and return on investment. The best location, world-class architecture, luxurious amenities and a shrewd financing structure are, alone, not enough to insure success. As operators and investors we must understand that we rely on our people, who are responsible, empowered and challenged to exceed guest expectations.

Furthermore, whatever the level of responsibility, skill set or compensation, whether we are talking about the CEO or head of housekeeping, each person involved in the organization must be considered as part of a team. This demands a commitment by leadership to a team concept; that the best return on investment is achieved through acquiring the best associates and maximizing their performance.

In this article, we will consider methods and strategies in recruiting, training, motivating and, hopefully, retaining the best possible team members throughout the many functional groups of any hospitality organization.

**Selecting the right people.** Finding people is not the same thing as selecting people. Moreover, selecting the right individual for any position in an organization starts with a clear delineation of the skills, experience and attitude demanded of that position.

Similarly, these are not simply job descriptions, but assessments of future responsibilities and accomplishments; organizational prescriptions, as it were. This exercise is the responsibility of leadership and will be based on the input of top management and the human resources department. It may be valuable to develop formal metrics intended to predict how applicants will fulfill these requirements.

For the most part, we do better in finding people who fit our needs, as opposed to adjusting a job prescription to fit what a candidate offers. Most hires work best when the individual is coming from a hospitality background, although lateral moves can work in some positions. Examples would include someone from hospital housekeeping moving to hospitality, recognizing the similarities, or in certain sales positions. However, today, even something like information technology or accounting is so hospitality specific that caution applies when making lateral hires. Those who are truly set on a career in hospitality are invited to start out, at a

minimum, with part-time employment to gain initial experience and see if the hospitality industry suits their interests, abilities and ambitions.

In today's world, it is possible to cast a wide net for applicants. Candidate portals include postings on hospitality-oriented job sites; relationships with local college and university hospitality programs; previous or current interns; trade shows and campus recruiting days; recommendations from existing and former industry colleagues, which can include a formal associate referral program; and, exercising due caution, professionally oriented social media sites. In some cases, especially for higher management positions, a professional recruiter that specializes in the hospital industry can be engaged.

The hiring process must be consistent, thorough and fair. The normal precautions against discriminatory behavior apply, just as they do in our everyday operations. Due diligence will include a background check, verification of employment history, reference checks and at least two interviews. In some cases, there is value in observing the applicant "on the job" in his or her existing position, either by pre-arrangement or in stealth mode.

Ultimately, the best way to attract team members, at all levels, may derive from the quality, performance and reputation of one's own organization. Doing well by creating a culture that brings out the best in people is our best advertisement.

#### **Come on board—in the right way.**

Orientation and initial training are key factors in the eventual performance and retention of team members. Properly conducted, orientation will not only provide the team member the necessary information and training to be as productive as possible from day one, but, also, maximize performance throughout one's career with the organization.

It is important to combine assignment of a personal learning coach for each new team member with written materials in the form of the Associate Handbook and an Orientation Checklist. While the Orientation Checklist will vary depending on job position, it is important that the organization and its trainers take these documents seriously and use them "exhaustively" during orientation and training.

Each organization will tailor the Associate Handbook and Orientation Checklist to its specific needs, but the accompanying sidebars list some key or suggested items to be covered. There are not meant to be definitive or "one size suits all." *Also, all orientation and training protocols should incorporate any mandated franchise requirements.*

Going forward, it is important to reinforce the organization's core principles instilled during orientation; i.e. mission, culture and operating philosophy. There are many ways this can

#### **CORE CONTENTS OF AN ASSOCIATE HANDBOOK**

Suggested areas to be covered in an associate handbook include:

- Core mission and values.
- Property introduction.
- Employment status and terms of employment.
- Definition of employment status and positions.
- Notice of Americans with Disabilities Act Compliance.
- Payroll; time sheets; overtime; tips; employment records.
- Benefits; vacation and personal leave policy; holidays; continuing education incentive; jury duty & leave of absence; family medical leave act; military service.
- Standards of appearance.
- Standards of conduct; absence and tardiness; confidentiality; dealing with inquiries from outside agencies; key control; notice to leave employment; harassment and complaint procedures; whistleblower protection; socializing and unauthorized use of guest rooms; information technology/property; social media policy; workplace violence and theft; disciplinary process.
- Drug free workplace standards and protocol.
- Facility issues: safety and security; accident prevention and reporting.
- Entity's statement of legal compliance.
- Receipt and acknowledgment.



## ORIENTATION

While the same topics will be covered for each individual being brought into an organization, orientation will be position-specific in some areas, i.e. skills required or weekly scheduling. General areas to cover and document in orientation include:

- General Information, including job description, training schedule, pay method and performance evaluation; specific property basics that all team members must know.
- Safety and security.
- Review of Associate Handbook (Benefits, policies and standards, standards of appearance and conduct, company culture and service expectations).
- Customer service and guest relations; communication skills.
- Corporate culture.
- Service traditions of entity and guiding principles.
- Introduce job skills checklists, skills required, what must be accomplished, weekly scheduling.
- Room and walk-around inspections, as appropriate.
- Hotel terminology and acronyms.

be accomplished. They include regular communications to team members, i.e. newsletters; webcasts; and staff meetings; reinforced by some type of iconic, graphic communications tool that can be customized in relation to job function.

Such Guiding Tools should help link each individual team member to overall organization goals. *It insures that all associates within individual hotels or units are aware of department action items and have a clear understanding of how to achieve them.* The Guiding tool will help each team member understand and account for his or her relation to other team members, guests, responsible business practices (i.e. environment; safety; community support; or anti-discrimination policies), financial targets and competitive position in the marketplace.

**Evaluation is a “two-way street.”** It is only human nature, and also quite useful, for any team member to want to know the answers to basic questions: How am I doing? How am I being graded? Why did I get the promotion or bonus I did, or vice versa?

Meaningful and consistently applied “measuring devices” are at the heart of effective management and operations. These include *organizational metrics, examples of which might include a Pride Survey or “pop quizzes” on operational subjects;*

*individual performance scorecards and associate opinion surveys.*

Certainly, individual performance scorecards will inform team members of performance pay or bonuses, promotions within the organization or areas for concern or improvement. Moreover, when used intelligently, *these measuring devices can be used to align performance expectations with corporate culture, guiding principles and operational needs.*

For example, performance scorecards should focus on all key metrics needed for a successful operation, with specific criteria that individuals are measured against monthly. Associates should know how they are doing on a regular basis so that there are no surprises at year-end review. On the flip side, the criteria can be adjusted to emphasize an operational area of growing importance—at each position; or one that is lagging at present. In this way, performance review is meaningful and useful.

As hinted at earlier when we discussed finding the right person for each position in an organization, it’s important not to confuse motivational styles or needs with organizational imperatives. The goal is to maximize the potential of each team member by appealing to his or her best interests and understanding what motivating factors might be in play. That’s being a good supervisor. However, all team members have responsibilities to fulfill and that is what needs to be measured, *not potential but accomplishment.* The more objective these

expectations are the better it is for management and team members.

Evaluation works both ways. Associates should have an opportunity to be heard not just on an ad hoc basis, but, also, through regular, formal opinion surveys. There are many advantages to soliciting feedback in this way, but it is important that the surveys are read thoroughly, taken seriously and acted upon—in writing. Associates should know what suggestions are valuable or practical, what changes are being made to implement any good ones, and which ones are not useful and why.

Today, we also need to monitor “opinions” expressed on social media platforms, the good and the bad. These messages can often be unfavorable but properly filtered they can tell us how well our team members are doing.

**Incentives to retention.** We must be honest. Compensation is an important element in attracting and retaining team members. Hospitality organizations should offer competitive compensation that includes base pay; medical, dental, vision and life insurance; holiday pay; paid personal days; annual bonuses; and paid tuition for classes to improve job skills. In today’s world, individuals may also value “non-cash” benefits such as the ability to arrange a flexible work schedule or job-share with a spouse, if both are employees of an organization, at a critical time in a couple’s life.

On the other hand, we know as a practical matter that compensation isn’t the only factor, or, always, the number one factor in team member satisfaction or retention. In fact, in some surveys, surprisingly or not, compensation may be far down the list on the reasons given as to why an employee is not happy or leaves an organization. Regardless, it is our responsibility as hospitality executives to recognize and encourage those factors or qualities that motivate team members to perform well on a daily basis and pursue a career with us.

At its core, career growth and retention is a function of how we supervise and treat others on a daily basis. Many career-oriented associates respond to an organizational style that emphasizes collaboration and learning situations with colleagues, a supervisor and clients or one that takes the time to praise individual behaviors, as appropriate.

Formally, compensation can be supplemented with Associate Recognition and Reward programs. Examples include points that build up based on performance reviews or limited incentives; i.e. based on improved occupancy rates, food and beverage revenue, guest satisfaction survey results and the like. Associate of the Month programs can also be useful as an incentive for team members if the overall recognition program and rewards are substantial and meaningful. When “advertised” and communicated well throughout the organization, these programs not only energize associates, but, also, the managers responsible for making the choices or monitoring the program.

**Conclusion:** In this discussion, there has been no distinction between the executives and managers of an organization and associates at other levels, whether it’s a desk clerk, waiter in a restaurant or maintenance worker. This was purposeful.

While different job criteria, expectations and compensation will apply to different supervisory levels or functions, each person employed with an organization should be considered a *team member*. The principles of recruiting, hiring, orientation and training, daily management, and reward remain the same: full disclosure; fairness; and consistency. When the entire team reads from the same playbook and each member strives to make the All-Star team the odds that your organization will finish in first are greatly enhanced.



## Richard Takach, Jr.

*Chairman & CEO, Vesta Hospitality*

In 1996, Richard Takach co-founded Vesta Hospitality with a vision of creating unique hotels that offer the finest in quality and service. With more than 30 years of experience in the hotel industry, he has earned a reputation for attracting and retaining talented hospitality industry professionals who in turn create award-winning hotels with outstanding customer satisfaction.

Before forming his own company, Mr. Takach served as Regional Manager for the Marriott Corporation in Bethesda, Maryland, and spent seven years as Executive Vice President of Dimension Development Company of Natchitoches, Louisiana. He has served on Hilton Hotels' Advisory Council and was Chairman (2007/8) of the Owner's Association for InterContinental Hotels Group. Mr. Takach was previously the Past Chairman for this organization and is also the Chairman of the Asia Pacific Region. Mr. Takach graduated from Pennsylvania State University with a degree in business administration and has since gained first-hand experience in every aspect of hotel operations, management and development.

Mr. Takach is an active community leader generously giving his time as an active member to the Vancouver Rotary Club and the Vancouver Historic Trust. He serves as Chairman of the Evergreen Highway Trail Coalition and serves on the Board as Chairman for the Clark College Foundation in Vancouver, Washington.

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