

Ingredients for success in career development

by Judi Brownell

Hospitality managers can expect to confront five challenges in the decades ahead. A study of luxury hotel general managers identifies the skills and personal characteristics respondents perceived as most important to their career development, as well as the future requirements for unit level managers and the major challenges they anticipate. The author then maps those skills and personal characteristics identified by respondents against future industry challenges to suggest additional managerial needs. Recommendations are presented for development strategies that will ensure hospitality organizations identify, develop, and retain individuals with the "right stuff."

What characterizes hospitality management? When unit managers from North American luxury hotels were asked that question, they had no problem coming up with answers.

"The diversity of people and activities under one roof," one general manager commented. Another described the situation by saying, "no two days are ever the

same – there are never-ending challenges and a constantly changing landscape." "We are . . . in the entertainment business," yet another general manager noted. Other respondents described hospitality management in the following manner: "We have to be dedicated and passionate;" "Managing the multi-dimensions of guest, staff, and ownership needs makes us unique," and "Personal and professional relationships, more than in other industries, indicate one's success in our field."

A variety of studies echo these practitioners' views and suggest that effectiveness in hospitality organizations, indeed, requires emphasis on a specific set of skills and personal characteristics.¹ Long hours, high workforce diversity, and increasingly sophisticated guests contribute to the daily challenges managers confront. Large portions of each day are spent addressing unanticipated

events, from weather-related crises to malfunctioning equipment and purchasing errors.

Industry's future shaped

Tomorrow's managers will help to shape the industry's future. Consequently, identifying the specific competencies required for moving from middle into senior level positions provides direction for selecting and developing the next generation of unit level managers. Such information is useful to educators and practitioners alike since succession planning and leadership development are keys to the future growth and vigor of the hospitality industry.

Leaders confront challenges

What challenges will leaders confront in the decades ahead? A literature review suggests that the men and women responsible for guiding tomorrow's hospitality organizations need to have strong interpersonal skills, be perceived as trustworthy, and demonstrate a concern for developing their employees. As the workforce becomes more diverse and the industry more multinational, recognition of cultural differences and a global orientation is also required. As change is inevitable, managers who succeed will be those who adapt to new technologies and keep pace with the demands of an uncertain future.²

First, while all managers have the dual tasks of accom-

plishing goals while facilitating effective relationships,³ this highly people-centered business requires a set of interpersonal skills suited to the multiple demands of a workplace driven by its human capital.⁴

Strong interpersonal skills are demonstrated in a variety of ways.⁵ Perhaps managers chat over lunch in the employee cafeteria or pitch in to barbeque chicken at the company picnic. By tapping into the organization's informal networks and by demonstrating a sincere concern for employees' interests and ideas, these managers are better able to understand employee concerns and to address conflicts and misunderstandings before they become serious problems. The same skills that facilitate an inclusive, team-oriented approach within the property forge strong external relationships as well.

Second, organizations can only thrive if their leaders facilitate trust and good will. In daily conversations as well as in public arenas, senior managers must instill confidence and demonstrate character through the choices they make and the messages they send. Effective leaders can be depended upon to "do the right thing"; their words and actions are aligned.⁶ Managers must build bonds of trust throughout the organization. Such bonds establish a foundation for working together effectively in more turbulent times.

A third challenge is to develop the hospitality workforce. This

may involve providing feedback to a front desk attendant interested in moving into a management position or mentoring a member of the marketing department. The customer-contact employee is part of the service experience; therefore, the quality of his or her performance reflects directly on the organization. Cultivating the knowledge, skills, and judgment of all employees through such activities as performance appraisals, coaching, and mentoring is a critical management task.⁷

Next, leaders who demonstrate interpersonal sensitivity are particularly effective in diverse organizations, as they are able to “sense and understand the viewpoints of everyone around the table.”⁸ Managing effectively in an increasingly diverse workforce is therefore a fourth industry challenge. As organizations become increasingly multinational, successful managers will be characterized not only by their cultural awareness internally but also by their global perspective.⁹ Serving guests from around the world requires a broad understanding of the impact of culture on values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Finally, those who look outward to examine the international landscape readily will notice that the environment is characterized by substantial and continuous change.¹⁰ Businesses are becoming ever more complex, and hospitality organizations are increasingly affected by such

things as advances in technology and changes in the economy. Working effectively in this milieu requires leaders to adapt to new circumstances and anticipate future demands.

Wise decisions needed

Identifying and developing hospitality leaders who are prepared to meet these challenges is not an easy task. While the specific competencies required to progress from middle to senior level management always have been elusive, it has never been more important to make wise decisions in the selection and development process. It seems essential, therefore, to identify the skills and personal characteristics that contribute to career development and that distinguish individuals with the potential to become successful general managers. Identifying these two sets of requirements will enable hospitality organizations to design development strategies that will ensure success in the increasingly competitive and complex business environment just described. Such direction will also guide educators interested in preparing students to manage the challenges of a diverse and people-centered industry.

GMs surveyed

A survey of general managers was conducted to determine the skills and personal characteristics these executives perceived to be most essential to their success and career development. While

this approach has inherent limitations, going directly to those who hold senior leadership positions to identify success factors provides a grounded and relevant perspective that the researchers believed would contribute to information currently available on the subject.

The first step was to gather items identified in previous studies as essential to effective management practice. The author searched hospitality databases and reviewed articles addressing managerial competencies and profiles of effective managers published between 1995 and 2003. This search generated a list of 43 recurring skills and personal traits. These items were then reviewed by a group of five general and regional hotel managers who were asked to delete any items they believed were irrelevant or redundant, and to suggest missing items. The result was a list of 36 items deemed to include the skills and personal traits most frequently associated with managerial effectiveness.

The list of items was then divided into two convenience categories, skills (question #1) and personal characteristics (question #2), and presented to respondents on five-point Likert scales. General managers were asked to rate each item according to the extent they believed it contributed to their career success and advancement from 1, representing unimportant, to 5, representing extremely impor-

tant. Part 2 of the survey posed a number of open-ended questions, including an inquiry regarding the traits respondents believed would be most important to their future effectiveness as a general manager. Respondents were also asked about the issues they felt posed the most significant future challenges, both to them personally as well as to the hospitality industry. The final section of the survey requested demographic information.

Eight companies selected

Eight hotel companies were invited to represent the luxury and upscale hotel segments in the United States as defined by J.D. Power and Associates' 2002 Domestic Hotel Guest Satisfaction Study.¹¹ All three luxury chains were included, and five of 12 upscale brands were selected by faculty and graduate students in hospitality management. Seven of the eight companies identified agreed to participate in this study. In each case, a corporate representative provided a list of general managers' addresses, and surveys were sent to all 187 general managers directly; 111 useable surveys were returned in self-addressed envelopes for a response rate of 59.3 percent.

Demographic information revealed that just over 90 percent of the general managers were male. All respondents had worked for more than 10 years in the hospitality industry and the

vast majority, nearly 75 percent, had worked in the industry for more than 20 years. While just under 30 percent of respondents had been in their position fewer than five years, 43 percent had been general managers for more than 10 years. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed indicated that English was their native language.

Skills are ranked

The first question asked respondents to rate, on a five-point Likert scale, the degree to which each of 16 skills contributed to their career development. The limited number of respondents made descriptive statistics the most reasonable approach to data analysis. Five skills had means of 4.3 and above. Leading teams came out at the top of the ranking (mean 4.73), with nearly 75 percent of respondents rating it as "extremely important." Effective listening ranked next (mean 4.62), followed by coaching employees (4.41). Next were providing feedback (mean 4.33) and managing conflict (4.31).

At the other end of the scale, using technology (mean 3.21) was viewed as the least important of all items, with only six respondents judging it to have been "extremely important" to their career development. Preparing reports (mean 3.44) and writing memos and letters (mean 3.49) were also viewed as less essential than other skills.

Presentational speaking (mean 3.71), intercultural communication (3.79), and negotiating (3.96) were also perceived to be less important than other items in the group.

When the top five personal characteristics (all means over 4.40) are examined in question #2, respondents agreed that hard work (mean 4.65), trustworthiness (mean 4.59), and integrity (mean 4.55) were keys to their career development. In fact, virtually 95 percent of respondents assigned the highest possible rating to hard work. Close behind was perseverance (mean 4.47), which over half of general managers found "extremely important."

On the other hand, nearly half of all general managers—over 90 percent of whom were male—agreed that gender (mean 1.84) was "unimportant" to their career development. Also among the five lowest-ranked characteristics were lucky breaks (mean 2.67), educational background (mean 3.09), and a global perspective (mean 3.36). Mentoring, with a mean score of 3.55, was perceived as less important to managerial success than 15 of the other items. Ranked means and standard deviations for items in both questions are presented in Table 1.

Future success analyzed

General managers were then presented with an open-ended question that asked them to list

Table 1
Hotel general managers' ranked means by question

| (N = 111) | MEAN | SD |
|---|------|------|
| Question #1: Skills | | |
| Leading teams | 4.73 | .52 |
| Effective listening | 4.62 | .52 |
| Coaching employees | 4.40 | .67 |
| Providing feedback | 4.33 | .62 |
| Managing conflict | 4.30 | .73 |
| Managing crises | 4.18 | .87 |
| Time management | 4.08 | .76 |
| Appraising employees | 4.00 | .72 |
| Managing diversity | 3.98 | .86 |
| Conducting meetings | 3.96 | .71 |
| Negotiating | 3.83 | .86 |
| Intercultural communication | 3.79 | .96 |
| Presentational speaking | 3.71 | 1.17 |
| Writing memos & letters | 3.48 | 1.01 |
| Preparing reports | 3.44 | .84 |
| Using technology | 3.20 | .84 |
| Question #2: Personal competencies | | |
| Hard work | 4.64 | .53 |
| Trustworthiness | 4.58 | .68 |
| Integrity | 4.55 | .65 |
| Positive attitude | 4.52 | .64 |
| Perseverance | 4.47 | .69 |
| Flexibility | 4.36 | .79 |
| Problem-solving ability | 4.36 | .62 |
| Confidence | 4.35 | .61 |
| Decision making ability | 4.34 | .59 |
| Knowledge of the field | 4.02 | .80 |
| Strategic planning | 4.00 | .77 |
| Persuasive ability | 3.91 | .79 |
| Personal sacrifice | 3.90 | .89 |
| Creativity | 3.82 | .95 |
| Personality fit | 3.68 | .93 |
| Mentoring | 3.55 | .93 |
| Global perspective | 3.36 | .98 |
| Educational background | 3.09 | .99 |
| Lucky breaks | 2.67 | .90 |
| Gender | 1.86 | 1.04 |

up to three skills or personal characteristics that they felt would be required for future success in their current position five to ten years out. In a content analysis, coders used single words as their unit of analysis and categories emerged from the data provided. An inter-rater reliability coefficient of .94 indicated a high level of agreement among raters. Percent of response in each cate-

gory is based on the total number of respondents (N=111) who mentioned a particular item, not on the total number of responses generated by the group. There were seven categories of responses that were each mentioned by more than 10 percent of the general managers. Findings are presented in Table 2.

Interpersonal communication skills, associated with managing

Table 2
Future leadership competencies: highest rates of response

| (N = 111) | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Skills and personal characteristics | | Number of responses | *Percent of respondents |
| Communication | | (47) | 42.3 |
| interpersonal skills | n = 39 | | |
| listening | n = 8 | | |
| Leadership | | (38) | 34.2 |
| manage change | n = 4 | | |
| articulate vision | n = 6 | | |
| leadership | n = 21 | | |
| build teams | n = 7 | | |
| Trust | | (29) | 26.1 |
| fair | n = 2 | | |
| trustworthy | n = 6 | | |
| integrity | n = 21 | | |
| Problem solving | | (19) | 17.1 |
| decision-making | n = 11 | | |
| problem solving | n = 8 | | |
| Flexibility | | (16) | 14.4 |
| Revenue management | | (15) | 13.5 |
| financial skills | n = 9 | | |
| revenue management | n = 6 | | |
| Strategic planning/thinking | | (14) | 12.6 |
| strategic planning | n = 10 | | |
| big picture view | n = 4 | | |

* percent of response is based on number of respondents, not total number of responses.

employees and building relationships, was mentioned by more than 40 percent of all respondents. The other two top categories, leadership skills and trustworthiness, were mentioned by nearly 30 percent of all general managers. The category of leadership encompassed responses such as “creating and sharing a vision,” and “leading employees through organizational change.”

Other categories that general managers agreed would be important in the future included problem-solving and decision-making skills (17.1 percent), flexibility (14.4 percent), and financial management (13.5 percent). Strategic thinking, involving the ability to take a big-picture view, was also mentioned with relative frequency (12.6 percent) as a future success factor.

Challenges are shared

A second open-ended question asked general managers to continue contemplating the future by sharing their opinions regarding the most pressing challenges facing both unit managers as well as the hospitality industry itself. Virtually half of all respondents believed that human resources issues would pose the most serious future concern. Within this larger category, 35 percent of all general managers indicated that finding qualified staff was their biggest problem. Others (16.8 percent) revealed that retention and training and developing

employees were their greatest dilemmas.

Two other issues were each mentioned by 11.7 percent of all respondents, keeping up with technology and the challenge of providing high quality service while ensuring a profitable operation. Another issue generated by several respondents was the need to balance and maintain relationships with various stakeholders — the corporate office, owner, employees, and guests (8.5 percent).

When general managers were asked about industry (as opposed to individual managerial) challenges, they once again focused on the human resources issues of recruitment and staffing, employee development, and retention (37.8 percent). At the industry level, the economy and world events were also on respondents' minds, with 21.2 percent mentioning some aspect of the external environment as their greatest concern. Slightly less than 15 percent of the general managers felt that the changes brought about by technology, especially the Internet's impact on distribution systems, were posing critical challenges. Once again, the difficult task of balancing quality with business needs was an issue 12.9 percent of respondents believed would continue to pose a challenge in the years ahead.

Finally, general managers were invited to offer any topics on which additional information

would be useful to them. Repeatedly, respondents mentioned their frustration that the hospitality industry often is not considered to be a top career choice for well-qualified young people in the job market. "What must we do to be perceived as a career opportunity?" one respondent asked. Another expressed a similar view, stating, "Why does the hospitality industry have such difficulty attracting and retaining talent?" Another questioned, "How can we increase the salary levels and still keep our eye on profit margins, which will continue to show restrained growth?"

Implications for tomorrow

What are the implications of findings from this study for management development and education? Survey results suggest specific skills and characteristics that general managers believe contribute to effectiveness and subsequent career development. The most critical skill areas for middle managers who aspire to

advance include the top-ranked items of leading teams, effective listening, coaching employees, providing feedback, and managing conflict. These skills can be characterized as those required for developing employees and interpersonal effectiveness. When item means for skills and personal competencies combined are examined, four of the six items with mean ratings above 4.50 are personal characteristics rather than skills—hard work, trustworthiness, integrity, and a positive attitude (Table 3).

If the five future industry challenges presented earlier are accepted, then one potentially fruitful approach to interpreting findings is to suggest the specific skills and personal characteristics required to address each challenge and to compare this set of traits with the items ranked as most valuable by survey respondents. In other words, do the skills and personal characteristics identified by general managers as critical for their success and

Table 3
Combined top ranked means (over 4.50)

| Item | 5 = extremely important 4 = very important | |
|-------------------|---|------|
| | Mean | SD |
| Leading teams | 4.73 | .521 |
| Hard work | 4.65 | .533 |
| Listening | 4.62 | .523 |
| Trustworthiness | 4.59 | .680 |
| Integrity | 4.55 | .657 |
| Positive attitude | 4.52 | .644 |

career development appear to be those that will be needed for meeting each of the five future industry challenges? While speculative, such an activity should reveal important gaps.

Personal skills valued

Individuals best suited to succeed in hospitality management are those who have a concern for their employees and the interpersonal skills required for effective execution. In reviewing item means, it seems clear that respondents were valued for their interpersonal skills such as leading teams, listening, and managing conflict (overall mean 4.54). A positive attitude was also viewed as essential to facilitate strong interpersonal relationships on the job (4.52).

In addition, respondents noted the importance of trustworthiness and integrity—and, to a slightly less extent, confidence—as assisting in their career development (mean 4.49). Not only does this cluster of personal characteristics align with the need for trust reported in the earlier literature review, it should also be noted that over a quarter of all general managers generated this response when asked an open-ended question about the factors required for success in the future. Strong interpersonal skills combined with perceived trustworthiness creates a profile of those likely to recognize and empower the organization's human capital.

The skills and personal char-

acteristics related to employee development also were perceived by respondents as important to their own advancement. In addition, nearly 12 percent of respondents mentioned developing employees as a future management challenge. The survey mean for appraising, coaching, and providing feedback combined was 4.25. When the rating for mentoring is included with this skill set, however, the overall mean drops to 4.07.

Managing diversity, change

The two final managerial challenges identified in the literature review were managing diversity and adapting to change (one aspect of change, the impact of technology, was also mentioned by more than 11 percent of respondents as a future challenge). The mean for the two skill items specifically related to intercultural communication, combined with the personal characteristic of a global perspective, was only 3.71. Items associated with adapting to change, which presumes a set of personal characteristics as well as technological savvy, received a mean of just 3.94.

Such relatively unimpressive means indicate that the skills and personal characteristics required to meet two of the industry's future challenges may well be overlooked. Given the certainties of change and globalization, those responsible for management development may want to address this potentially serious gap. Table

4 illustrates these disparities by suggesting which of the skills and personal characteristics included on the survey align most closely with each of the five industry challenges, and providing the mean ratings.

While the importance of management development is undisputed,¹² the effectiveness of current efforts has been questioned on several fronts. Neither organizations themselves nor the academic institutions that provide hospitality management education have escaped criticism leveled against largely conceptual designs, as study after study finds that “vision is easy, execution is hard.”¹³ Rifkin¹⁴ speaks for many of his

colleagues when he notes that the true test of leadership is “trial by fire.” While managers need basic concepts to guide their thinking, they must then be able to apply what they know appropriately in the field. As another consultant notes, “Ninety five percent of managers say the right thing. Five percent can actually do it.”¹⁵

Academic settings rated

Hospitality management educators are in agreement that strong experiential course components strengthen individuals’ ability to apply key concepts and transfer skills from the classroom to the workplace. Laboratories, team activities, experiential exer-

Table 4
Skills and personal characteristics to meet industry challenges

| Perceived as contributing to career development (means on five-point scales) | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Challenge | Skills | Personal Characteristics |
| leading teams & interpersonal skills mean = 4.54 | leading teams (4.73) | positive attitude (4.52) |
| | conflict management (4.31) | |
| | effective listening (4.62) | |
| instilling trust mean = 4.49 | | integrity (4.55) |
| | | trustworthiness (4.59) |
| | | confidence (4.35) |
| developing employees mean = 4.07 | appraising (4.01) | |
| | coaching (4.41) | |
| | providing feedback (4.33) | |
| managing in a global environment mean = 3.71 | intercultural communication(3.79) | global perspective (3.36) |
| | managing diversity (3.98) | |
| adapting to change mean = 3.94 | technological expertise (3.21) | flexibility (4.37) |
| | | creativity (3.82) |
| | | problem solving ability (4.36) |

Source: Literature review

Source: Survey results

cises, community service projects, and internships all contribute to the relevance of the instruction and facilitate the deeper learning required to develop critical management competencies.

Educators might take note of the fact that respondents ranked the value of an educational background third from the bottom in terms of items perceived to contribute to their career success (mean 3.09). The message seems clear; academic programs are not realizing their potential to provide the type of experience that is perceived as directly promoting career advancement. Efforts to enhance instructional relevance are needed to increase general managers' perceptions of the value of an educational background.

Designing academic programs to produce tomorrow's hospitality leaders requires more than just effective instructional strategies. As reported earlier, four of the six items associated with career development – and also receiving the highest overall mean ratings – were personal characteristics. Admission processes must address the question of desired personal traits and provide methods to assess applicants' flexibility, creativity, attitude, and work ethic as well as their more traditional credentials.

If practitioners are to trust the value of a hospitality degree, they will need to be assured that graduates have more than a solid business foundation and a functional knowledge of the industry. They will want to know that graduates

are also prepared to apply their expertise to create inclusive, team-based cultures and handle daily dilemmas with a positive, "can do" approach. This finding suggests that admissions practices should address key personal characteristics as well as more traditional criteria, and that these factors play a much more central role in ensuring graduates' success than commonly acknowledged.

Women fall behind

While admissions statistics indicate that women are well-represented in hospitality management academic programs, the demographic information from this study shows that a proportionately small number are assuming unit level leadership positions in the luxury hotel segment. This finding suggests that special attention should be given to better defining career paths for women in middle management positions. In addition, the obstacles to women's career development need to be identified clearly and addressed.

Once applicants are admitted, educators also must share responsibility for helping future industry leaders to build character and behave ethically by focusing not only on what students learn, but also on whom they become as members of a global community. Students who come to understand that they are defined by the choices they make, day in and day out, will be better prepared to align vision, values, and behavior as they step into management positions.

Classroom training methods alone are insufficient to prepare leaders to handle the dynamics of unanticipated events in a constantly changing workplace. Tichy¹⁶ is among those who argue for more action learning on the job, explaining that formal training can influence no more than 20 percent of a leader's professional development.¹⁷ Bennis¹⁸ concludes that the concepts are essential, but afterward even the most senior managers "have to invent it for themselves in the field." Supervisors must take responsibility for continuous employee learning and recognize "teachable moments."¹⁹ Opportunities to demonstrate or reinforce appropriate responses might present themselves in a variety of situations, such as when an employee conflict arises or when special accommodation is made for a guest.

Mentoring is neglected

The skills of providing feedback, appraising employees, and coaching will become increasingly important as managers at all levels share responsibility for developing members of their teams.²⁰ Managers' ability to serve as role models by demonstrating effective practices is also a proven method of helping employees recognize and acquire new skills. While mentoring has been found to be an effective development activity,²¹ respondents in this study rated it near the bottom of the list (mean 3.55) of behaviors contributing to their

career success. Additional research is required to determine why mentoring appears to be a neglected practice.

In addition to renewed focus on mentoring, other skills and personal characteristics that deserve additional attention are those related to managing diversity and change. Effective methods must be developed to help new managers communicate across cultures and prepare for managing in a multicultural environment. Developing structured programs to identify and assess core competencies enables employees to grow throughout the course of their careers. As organizational structures flatten and service employees take more responsibility for problem solving, developmental activities and accompanying reward systems must be in place at all levels.

The concern raised by respondents regarding the industry's inability to attract young talent into management positions is troubling. A more vigorous focus on career development, and the clarification of career paths, may begin to address the recruitment issues that were mentioned. Partnering with academic institutions to design and deliver tailored programs for continuing education ensures that managers remain challenged and equipped with cutting-edge industry practices.

Selection processes also must be aligned with management development goals and designed to assess such competencies as

work ethics, integrity, and a positive predisposition. These traits are nearly impossible to modify once an employee is on the job, yet researchers interested in identifying characteristics related to managerial effectiveness repeatedly have identified them as critical success factors. Assessment centers, for instance, are one of the most effective methods for observing individuals' personal characteristics in settings similar to those they confront in the workplace. In addition, assessment centers are one of the most powerful tools for judging an individual's ability to respond appropriately to circumstances and dilemmas that might arise in the future.²²

The ideas presented here are summarized in Figure 1, which parallels industry and academic management development processes. Elements of the model illustrate the ways in which academic and industry professionals first select, and then continuously assess and develop, management talent through a variety of methods and interventions. The need for continuous scanning to identify future leadership requirements is also emphasized.

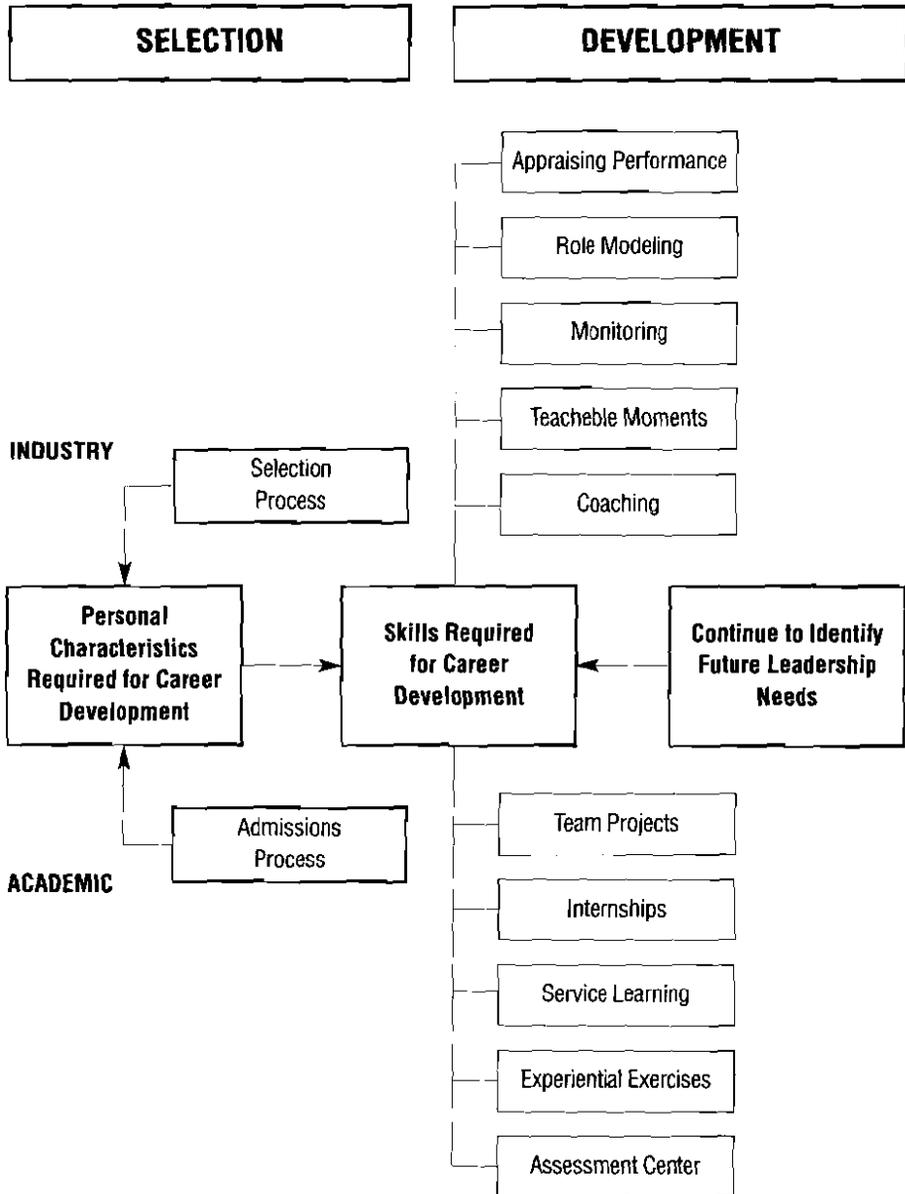
Tomorrow's leaders will face an ever-changing workplace with a dynamic set of roles and responsibilities.²³ The men and women already in senior management positions, those general managers who participated in this study, agree that strong interpersonal and leader-

ship skills will be essential for effectiveness as they articulate their vision and inspire all employees to play a role in that future.

Achievement ranks high

When general managers were asked what aspect of their job was most personally rewarding, nearly 40 percent of study participants indicated that they enjoyed helping their employees to grow and watching them succeed. When respondents reflected further on what it was about the job that captured their passions and imaginations, several mentioned the virtually limitless opportunities hospitality leadership provides for "making a difference where it matters." The general manager profile that emerged from this study was characterized by the values of trust and integrity. Respondents noted the satisfaction of "achieving things that seem impossible," and "creating magic" with employees by facilitating commitment and teamwork. Clearly, these general managers have experienced the excitement of looking into the future and realizing that it is in their hands. Guided by a clear vision of the ingredients for managerial effectiveness and equipped with a variety of career development strategies, general managers look forward to the role they can play in shaping the next generation of hospitality leaders.

Figure 1
Methods for developing future hospitality leaders



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