

CORNELL HR REVIEW

9th Annual National HR in Hospitality Conference & Expo

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As a graduate student at The School of Hotel Administration, I had the pleasure of attending the 9th Annual National HR in Hospitality Conference & Expo. The conference was held at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, Nevada from March 16-18 and attracted HR and labor and employment relations professionals from all sectors of the industry. It was a great opportunity to network with and learn from key industry leaders such as Robert Mellwig, EVP of Really Cool People at Destination Hotels, Alan Momeyer, VP of HR at Loews Corporation, and Ellen Dubois du Bellay, SVP of Learning and Talent Management at Four Seasons.

One of the talks that I most enjoyed was the keynote address given by Chris Hunsberger, EVP of Global HR for Four Seasons. Chris, or CBH as he is most commonly referred to, has an undergraduate degree from Cornell's School of Hotel Administration and has been with Four Seasons since graduating in 1981. CBH started as a management trainee and throughout his career has held positions ranging from General Manager to EVP of Product and Innovation. He was most recently promoted to his current role in HR in January of this year. CBH discussed the importance of innovation in HR and gave some examples of what Four Seasons is doing in this space.

CBH began by discussing some of the HR challenges that Four Seasons is currently facing, including the talent gap, the organization's China strategy, and the lack of women in leadership roles in operations. The majority (56%) of Four Seasons management trainees are women, but females comprise fewer than 10% of the organization's general managers. Ostensibly, somewhere along the way women are taking themselves off of the GM track, perhaps because they do not feel they can work such a demanding job and raise a family at the same time. This is something that the HR team is working to correct. They are looking at ways for employees to have a better work-life balance for some of these high impact operational roles. Chris looks to other prominent companies that are innovating in HR for inspiration. For example, Google practices employee development as a science. They take the bottom 10% of the leadership team, and imparts on that group the responsibility for leading next year's development efforts. Netflix lets their employees set their own holiday schedules, which gives them more freedom to create a balance that works for each individual. Whole Foods uses team voting: two-thirds of your peer group votes on whether a new employee fits in and should remain an employee at the end of his or her probationary period. CBH stresses that it is important not to replicate what others are doing but rather to draw inspiration from them and find ideas that will work at your company.

Four Seasons often looks to their employees for new ideas and recently implemented an idea from the Boston property. Employees there noticed that guests often complained about room service. The main complaints they heard were that room service took too long (around 30-40 minutes) and was too pricey. Employees came up with the idea for a 15-minute room service menu. This new menu featured select items that would only take 15 minutes to get to your room from the time you call and place the order. The hotel received incredible feedback from guests and the company decided to roll the idea out as a corporate initiative. Four Seasons recognized that each of their properties is different and allowed the teams to tailor this new program to fit the needs of their guests. This example demonstrated the value of cross-functional teams and acting quickly on a new idea. Chris and his team are constantly looking at ways to further imbed the culture of innovation into the company. How can HR contribute to innovation? By hiring the right people into the right roles and looking at new ways to recognize and reward employees. He also stressed the importance of learning to accept failure as a byproduct of innovation. Not everything is going to work but that doesn't mean that organizations shouldn't innovate.

Chris' talk was a great way to kick off the conference and really inspired the HR community to think of new ways to innovate in their own companies. Many of the talks over the following days reflected this theme of innovation. Millennials have different wants and needs than previous generations and it is important for HR professionals to keep this in mind as they develop new HR practices. For instance, Destination Hotels recognizes millennials' need for frequent feedback and have made annual performance reviews optional. They believe that there should be a culture of feedback within an organization and the conversation should be happening every day, not just once a year. They also do not redline employee salaries. They believe that in order to retain key talent, they shouldn't put an absolute cap on base compensation. Destination also allows employees to work where and when they want to. Many of their HR team members at the conference said they work from home at least one day a week. The company wants to give their employees this kind of flexibility because they know that it helps to create more of a balance between work, life, and play. Four Seasons has implemented a "dynamic leadership program" focused on emotional intelligence rather than technical skills. This pushed many people out of their comfort zones and caused them to look at their jobs in a different way. The company saw improvements in many "derailed" managers and helped to weed out managers that were not able to improve. Four Seasons also took their learning managers out of the HR department and now has those employees reporting directly to the GM. This allows the learning manager to be more embedded in the day-to-day operations of the hotel and therefore see where there are gaps in training. This was a controversial thing to do because this made the HR team one person smaller. However, it was the right decision for the company because now the training team is heavily involved in projects relating to maintaining the Four Seasons standards.

These are just a few examples of the ways in which hotel companies today are starting to innovate. Looking to the future, it will be interesting to see what new and innovative ideas HR departments develop and implement. It is an exciting time for HR in the hospitality industry and I look forward to what is to come. ✎

[Maud Lindseth](#) is completing the one year Master of Management in Hospitality program at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration. Before graduate school, Maud worked in human resources for Vail Resorts, Inspirato, and The Integer Group in talent acquisition and as a generalist. Maud holds a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from The University of Denver with a major in Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Management. She is originally from Gates Mills, Ohio.