

Transcription - Rob Fahey Part 1

Welcome back. I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today we are joined by Rob Fahey who is currently the General Manager of the Holiday Inn Express in Newcastle, Australia. I have had occasion to interact with Rob as a customer and in terms of customer service and the things that we've talked about over the last few weeks, success sharing with your staff and about giving praise and about taking criticism and all of those things. So that, combined with the fact that we have not ever in 200 plus episodes, talked to anyone from the hospitality industry, we thought we might corner Rob and talk to him about those sorts of issues, particularly because as you will hear, the place where he is at the moment has been at the forefront of reaction to the covid-19 activities in the hospitality industry. But I'll tell him tell you what the journey has been for this particular hotel in that period of time. So, welcome Rob, good to have you with us.

Thanks Kim, great to be here, appreciate the opportunity. Ron sent through his bio which you can see on the website and it's a pretty impressive one. Having met him, I already had a sense of what sort of age he was, as we do, we judge people's ages, and I read the bio this morning and I thought he must have started working when he was about ten. Ha, I did do a paper run when I was about ten, I remember! So you're right!

There's some very interesting periods of time. Rob, were you always in the hospitality industry? No Kim, I actually started straight out of school I went to finance. My mother worked in the banking industry and I found myself in a role in that industry straight out of school and I spent the best part of four or five years in that industry. I guess what sparked my interest in hospitality, was, I guess you could call it a "gap" year, in New Zealand where I became a porter at a hotel, parking expensive cars and opening doors, the red jacket gold buttons scenario. Something in that triggered my love for hotels and the hospitality industry and upon my return to Australia I pursued that. 14, 15 years ago I went into that, this industry now.

The hospitality industry is a fairly structured in terms of progression through it, isn't it? You can't really just walk into any level in the industry, well in the hotel industry, let's say? Yeah, that's true. I guess what also was appealing was the opportunity to work your way up. I started on nights at a brand new hotel at the time, Crowne Plaza, Hunter Valley. I got the opportunity on nights with my finance background to do a bit of night audit and reconciling the books. From there you can work your way up quite quickly, depending on how hardworking

and dedicated you are. But yeah, there's certainly opportunity for those that really want to pursue that.

Is it a progression that is set for you in terms of the hotel chain that you are with or can you pick and choose? There's an element of both. We do a progression or personal development plan. So it's a case of sitting down with your line manager at the time and discussing what direction you'd like to go and again this industry can present you with so many different avenues as to whether you go down the finance path or you go into more commercial sales, marketing, business development or the operational part, so you can pick and choose somewhat. And again, that was quite appealing to have this. At any point you could veer off into another direction. So, I chose the ops path, coming through front office and food and beverage and my role currently does also touch on the commercial side, which I really enjoy as well. I'm quite fortunate in my current role having that diversity.

The first question that we did send you earlier is about whether you see what you do as a product or service industry? Yes, it's a bit of both and it's a great question. It got me really thinking about it and of course we offer a product but if you really think about it, I think in hotels and in hospitality in general, we're selling an experience. There's certain industries that sell a product, it's very tangible. Could be groceries or whatever it might but for us it's all about that experience, particularly in the hotels. There's so many hotels out there, as you know, and they're brick and mortar, four walls but to me it's that guest experience that makes the difference. Based on that I'm a really strong believer that our industry is very much an experience based or a service based industry.

The next one is going to take you back down the path, thinking about all the times you've been a manager. We asked you what your biggest management challenge has been. It's probably two things. You can take it right back to when I first started in the industry and coming in at an entry level role. And then, you know, fast moving, working your way up. So in that 12 to 24 months period there is that time we you transition from a front line role into a management role or a supervisory role. My biggest challenge I remember back then was all of a sudden you're managing people that you were working alongside only maybe 6 to 12 months prior. I always found it very difficult, let's call it a learning experience, to deal with that. All of a sudden they're looking to you for leadership where you're giving them direction or disciplinary action even. So I found that quite difficult at the time to do that, to draw that line. Over the years that's become easier, as you get more experience.

The last six months, really, that's probably in a lot of people's careers, tested their leadership and management style. And I'm certainly no different and I think, for me, management is just about people, managing people. So obviously the most critical part of the business in my opinion, is also the most complex. And I think the way that we manage people has a massive impact on the success or otherwise of the business. So for me during the pandemic, that was the most difficult thing for me. As an example, we were literally celebrating or supposed to be celebrating, our first birthday of opening the hotel. It was almost a year to the day, instead I was on the phone calling the team advising them of the temporary closure of the hotel. And obviously, I was standing people down and that was very difficult because there is that emotion attached to it. Because you know that this will have a massive impact on their personal life, particularly those that were not eligible for JobKeeper. So the people side for me, is the most challenging because there's emotion attached to it.

By the way you're talking I can tell that you're very much a people person. You're thinking from their point of view, you're showing natural leadership and you're putting yourself in their position as well. And I think that is a really great leadership style because then you can reach them better can't you? Absolutely. 100% agree and I guess I got that from my previous leaders as well. I've been very fortunate to work under some exceptional leaders that put people to the forefront. Like I said, without the people, we don't have much. So, I think, for me, that's where the success of the business stands. If you've got a happy team, an engaged team agreement rather than a driven team then a lot of the other stuff looks after itself.

While we're talking about people, I'd like to talk a bit about the customer side of things. Sure. Customers, to me that's always been no matter what industry, but particularly in the hotel industry, where two people will have the same experience and have such a diverse view or an opinion about it. Quite true. That must be a huge challenge for people like yourself and your team. So what do you like most about dealing with customers? What do you like least about that? It's a great question. Look, you're spot on and an example of that, some very subjective examples in a hotel, the bedding, or the pillows, the linen, you know, when one guest absolutely loves it and then the next may not find it to their preference or or expectation. I think that's also part of the appeal of the industry, no day is the same, every day is different. And I guess what works here is we welcome feedback. So we try and encourage feedback and I guess for me if there's a guest that's not happy then the natural thing to do, would be to shy away from the problem or go into your shell or get defensive and we're trying to coach the team to think of it the other way and actually embrace it, talk through it. There's

processes and training that we do to work through that. But it's also an opportunity and that's what we need to view a complaint or some feedback as an opportunity to see how to turn it around. So I guess trying to put that positive spin on a negative situation and that's something that we are really, really trying to achieve.

I will say on that particular topic that you have a workforce that is predominantly of an age where we wouldn't expect them to be able to handle that sort of feedback. The skills that you have transferred to them, that they've taken on as well, it's really interesting from an academic point of view to watch it happening because I've seen it happen in the reception area, I've seen it happen in the hallways and to a person they do what you're training them to do. They listen. They don't react, they don't take it on the chin, they don't seem to stew over the negative stuff that's gets thrown at them and it is very much a confrontation when it happens because the person who's going to complain is ready for battle. It's interesting to hear the background of you talking about it and identifying the skills that you're giving these people so that those that are listening to us can't negate that by saying all my teams are under 30. You do have a demographic in your staff that we might overlook in terms of the skills that they should have, so it's great that you've been able to share that with us today.

An area that I'm interested in, in terms of your growth as a manager, is mentoring a part, a structured part, of your employment? It is, I suppose I embrace it. I love coaching and I've done a lot of mentoring. So on a day to day basis, probably more in my previous role as a front office manager I had that really day to day interaction with the team. I was in amongst the operation a lot more and in this role I still am but to an extent I also need to take a step back and look at things from the balcony rather than from the dance floor so to speak and look at that strategic commercial side. So looking back in previous roles, yes, absolutely there was a very structured regime, I suppose. We have, in IHG, one of the companies I work for, we have what's called a future leader. So I've been in certain situations actually where they get assigned a mentor and then that person you work quite closely with, I guess you become their coach for that period. So that was something in a more structured scenario, which I really, really enjoyed.

These days, we don't have that with the company I'm with now, but it doesn't mean to say that, you know, it's can't happen in a little less structured approach. That's part of the role I really enjoy, is to mentor people and to encourage people.

You've been in a great situation where you have varied experience where you worked both in country and out-of-country on, projects etc, so you've got a good understanding of how other places work, I guess. Is that part of the things that you look out for as far as what are your competitors doing? Where do I take the hotel in the future? How do you go about looking at the industry as a whole, learning from the industry? That's critical I think. You really need to keep your finger on the pulse with regards to what your competitors are doing just so you are staying fresh, staying relevant, staying that step ahead. Newcastle being a smaller population, we work closely together whenever we come together as an industry group and share ideas, share challenges, so there's a really really good relationship between the hotels within the city. We learn from each other and we look after each other as well. So yes it's certainly critical to understand what your competitors are doing, different brands and things like industry meetings, just talking to people, reading publications on new technology that's available within the hotel industry, all of that in this particular climate is really, really critical.

That's a good point for us to take a break in our discussion with Rob Fahey. Join us for part two, but from now I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.