

## Transcription - Rob Fahey Part 2

Welcome back. I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today, we're continuing our discussion with Rob Fahey, the General Manager from Holiday Inn Express at Newcastle in New South Wales, Australia. In this discussion, we're going to explore the human resources side of the hospitality industry, and particularly as it relates to how it affected this particular hotel during the covid restrictions and lockdowns that came in to place during 2020.

I read the way you advertise, you're talking about the locals, you're here for the locals, they come for a staycation, if you like, as well as visitors. I really like that because I think sometimes (and that was before covid) that is a good way of saying we're part of the community and we welcome you to our home as well.

Absolutely and I think a lot of people don't really discover their own backyard. We don't actually view it as a visitor naturally, but I think that an opportunity to stay in a hotel in your own backyard and experience it, particularly Newcastle, has so much to offer people that locals overlook. I think it's a great thing to do and we've done it. You know, you live here and every now and then you stay at the hotel or you stay at a hotel in the Hunter Valley and it just opens your eyes to just how beautiful our backyard is. I think that's really important.

What it also reinforces is that the human resources that are available in the local area, so that if you are someone who is employing locally, you get to get a better feel for what's out there in terms of human resources as well. That's true, absolutely and it's a great point Kim, as we like to support local suppliers as well. That's one big thing, that particular thing in the wake of this last six months, trying to support those local suppliers and those small businesses is really quite a passion of ours.

Just on that learning from within the industry, do you look outside your industry to see if they've got some interesting things that you might try in a management sense? Always. I guess with hospitality you can adopt a lot leadership ideas from different industries and adapt them into your industry. I think you'd be silly not to learn from different leaders from different industries and I think fundamentally the principles are the same in terms of leadership and managing people or managing a business. There might be some different intricacies in doing so but I think we can all learn from each other irrespective of the industry.

Fulyana and I have worked together for over 30 something years, but because Fulyana's background was very much more in the finance industry than mine, it's

interesting for me to hear her views on management, problems, case studies that people send us and we will have very different outlooks, very different views because of that background we've had in different industries. In the end what we're providing is opportunities for people to see whether any of those solutions work or something else, or a combination will spark some other thought. So we're always keen to hear from any kind of industry, doesn't matter what it is because there's always information that can be shared. I think what you're giving us today is a lot about managing the human resources. I will have to tell you in 200 episodes, that's the area where we get the most enquiries, where we have the most case studies.

I guess the difference is, and why I was talking about the customer in this case, is the fact that all you have exposure, direct exposure to their customers. In other industries, you could be in an operational area where you are serving someone who is serving the customer. But in your business most people, whether you're in the maintenance area, in the cleaning area, the front desk, in the restaurants or beverage side or whether you're in the finance side doing their billing, you really know your customers. Yes, that's so true. I guess you're always on show even if you aren't directly with that customer at that time or that guest at that time. If you're on the floor then people are looking at your body language and that's a really important part, is to maintain that positive and open body language even if you're not directly engaging with that customer. I guess it can tell a lot about a person or a culture or a workplace culture.

Just speaking on the workplace culture, I will highlight the fact that one of the images that you sent us to use, shows a lovely pair of cherry socks. Ah yes, we're all into fun socks here. We have fun sock Friday. That was something that I wanted to ask and I wanted to bring to the fore because I know that there is another person on the staff who every time we are there, makes a point of showing us what socks she's got on. And the last time we were there she had to show us that they were two different socks.

She was the one that came up with fun sock Friday. It's about having fun. It's something so small and it's fun. You know, you've got to have some fun while you're working, too. The point about it too, is exactly what you're saying. It's a small thing, it's a little thing, you're not asking anyone to step out of their comfort zone because no-one will see the socks unless they are shown. It does bring everyone together. It does give them a focus that is not about "I've got to go to work today".

That experience is really not just a good example of the culture of your guys as a

team, but the interaction with the customer. What you just said Kim, is the person came to you and that was so lovely. I would love to be in there when you know, when the other staff laugh because it's fun shared. That's true. It means we can engage. And I think that's it is a relaxed tone, the Express brand, and I really enjoy that as well. We get return guests and we can actually have an engagement with them and take that relaxed approach as well, still professional of course, but I like the fact that we can engage with our guests in that manner.

No matter where you are or what you do, you get recognized, if you can use someone's name then they feel much better about the whole experience. One of our staff, Linda, she can memorize coffee orders. And that's always been a skill that she's had - names and coffee orders and no matter how hard I try, I get it wrong every time. But she can look at a guest and say that's a short black, or white or latte and the guests love it. That's the difference a good hotel, a good guest experience and a great guest experience. Those little things are really critical.

What's really good about what you just said, Rob, is that you know that about your staff. Some managers don't, some leaders actually try their best but they don't have that. So you already know that about your people. It must be very rewarding for both of you. It is and you're right and I guess I was in a really fortunate position, being a new hotel, as you said Fulyana, I could handpick my team right from the outset. To have that, to be able to go into a brand new hotel when we opened last year, was such an advantage, having worked with a lot of these guys. We created a hit list almost and said we need these people to give the hotel a reputation. So yes, very fortunate.

Just on that, because that intrigues me, is that you've got this list of people that you've worked with before, have they worked with one another before? Yes, some have. Yeah, yeah. And I guess that makes a big difference as well. And it's a great point, because even when I was assembling the team that had a lot to do with it. How does this person work with that person or are they a good team fit. So I can have someone that can be the greatest resume or the best worker but will they fit within the team that we've created? And there were certain situations where I had to look at it and say well I think that person is the wrong fit, irrespective of their skill set, so that is also really critical because then being such a smaller team, that dynamic of working really well together is really, really critical as well.

So in terms of the people management, we all know that there has been great upheaval when the hotel did need to be closed over that lockdown time. How do

you pick up after that? That was one of the big challenges. So I guess just going back to when we closed the hotel, so 31 March we closed. At that point there was no end date. No-one knew what the future held. It was very, very unknown. And I think that was probably the most concerning or scary thing that I couldn't give the team an end date to say look, it's only for three months or it's six months. We had no idea. So I think the communication is critical. We just kept the guys up to date. We did Zoom calls and different things. And then once we finally got back to reopen it was such a celebration. I had encouraged people to get other work, they needed to make a living and I lost some that weren't able to get JobKeeper that needed to make a living. So I had people, part of the team, seek other work and they've still got those jobs now. So I guess juggling that, you know, the need of the hotel now once we reopened, trying to juggle what they've currently got. That's been difficult but on the whole it's been good. And I think we've been able to manage to keep the core group of people together which we've been really lucky with and now things are going well.

Again, just take us through that passage of time. So you've reopened and obviously there is still restrictions in place and things you couldn't do. When you talk about the experience for the guests, for your customers, you still weren't able really to give them experiences that you had previously or would expect to give them. So how do you work through that? I guess the question is, how do you not get disgruntled with not being able to do what you want to do?

I think the overarching thing to remember is we can only control what we can control. It's no use getting stressed or upset about things, they're out of our control. So we focus heavily on the areas that we can make a difference. So you're right though, that the product that we, post covid I guess you could say, is completely different, heavily regulated for all the right reasons, of course, but you're right, it does impact the guest experience. From a team perspective we've been working as being a brand new hotel, everything is great then all of a sudden we're reopening the doors in a completely different world. Our SOPs, as we know it, have been flicked on their heads where there's a lot more regulation, so much more around cleaning. And cleaning was obviously fundamental prior but this time there's so many more things around the cleaning and the hand sanitisers and the screens you see at the desk, food and beverage was heavily impacted to what we will be offering in the food and beverage now.

Probably the biggest challenge for us is the buffet breakfast. We were number 1 in the region last year for our beautiful buffet brekky, all of a sudden, gone. So we did have to almost start again to understand what the market expectations were. Now there are cost considerations that come into it. So there's so many

hurdles I guess you could say which is preventing us from not being able to offer what we would wholeheartedly love to offer. That has been very challenging in that space.

In terms of your situation in comparison to others in the IHG, where do you sit? In terms of a product offering? The biggest one would be breakfast and breakfast has been identified as a key part of the guest stay. It's your first meal for the day, it sets the tone for the day. So there's been a lot of talk about brekky, a lot of ideas. So when we reopened, it was very much getting a feel for what the expectation of the guest is and then people coming or traveling straight out of covid, I guess there was a bit more understanding about not having the buffet. But we've evolved a lot since that June reopening. We've come a long way in terms of our brekky offering and that was a lot of talking to guests and a lot of surveys, of course, we get measured and all that and we scrutinize that very, very heavily and react. I think that's really critical, is to listen to our guests. So we've done that, there's still a way to go, still with a very slow process on getting to that, of meeting that balance of maintaining costs as well as providing a great guest experience. I think that's the challenge going forward.

Time to take a break in our discussion with Rob Fahey. We will continue again in Part 3 of this fascinating look into the hospitality industry and the challenges and the human resources ideas that Rob is presenting to us. But for now, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.