
Teaching human resource management in hospitality and tourism: a critique

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Argues for more real and in-depth understanding of the industry – theoretical and conceptual interpretations of human resource management issues – to be provided to students before operational and presumptive models. Suggests that students are currently uncritical perpetuators of the status quo rather than effective and thinking would-be managers ready to change things for the better.

Hospitality and tourism management: order or chaos?

One of the beautiful but frustrating things about working, teaching and researching in the hospitality/tourism area is the range of contradictions that are faced on a daily basis, born out of the diverse nature of the industry in terms of size, geographical location, culture, business purpose and varied customer expectations. Take, as an example, a hospitality industry within which customers are constantly beset with inhospitality in the way in which they are treated. Service quality issues at a personal, delivery level (the “moment of truth”) are among the most common areas in which hospitality and tourism enterprises fail in seeking to meet customer expectations. This is clearly recognised by the Department of National Heritage[1] (1996) among a number of studies in this area. Yet it is, frequently, the service delivery rather than the product which “make or break” a guest’s hospitality experience and the conundrum or contradiction here is that there is an expectation that this quality service is delivered by those receiving the poorest remuneration, working in the least attractive conditions and in a casual or temporary capacity (Baum, 1995; Wood, 1992).

The hospitality and tourism sector defies generalisation in almost every aspect of its operation and this defiance is, undoubtedly, one of the root causes of contradiction. The sector is characterised by diversity in terms of the types of businesses which collectively comprise tourism/hospitality, frequently operating in an isolation which denies unity of purpose or recognition that they are part of a common industry or sector. Business size is also very varied, ranging from the independent operator, employing little more than family members, the small franchise operator, the nationally-based chain operation through to emerging global businesses such as British Airways or Accor. Market diversity is also an important characteristic of tourism/hospitality in that, despite attempts at segmentation and the definition of segment-driven product standards, each customer is individual in her needs and the same customer may have different demands in different contexts, reflecting

the phenomenological nature of customer expectations. A further dimension of diversity is represented by the multicultural nature of the sector in terms of its markets, employees, management and ownership (Baum, 1996a). The complexity of this environment, which offers the potential for uniqueness in all its interactions, is the reason why generalisation must be undertaken with extreme caution in any discussion of tourism/hospitality.

As teachers, hospitality and tourism faculty are tempted to defy this caution and, instead, attempt to simplify concepts and present information about the sector in such a way that it is digestible by undergraduate and even graduate students. As a consequence, we generalise. We attempt to identify rules and patterns which are applicable to the industry and then addendum our comments with a series of caveats which our students conveniently ignore. For example, there is growing recognition, in hospitality curricula, of the market and product significance of the budget hotel sector. However, underlying discussion of this sector are assumptions of homogeneity within provision between the major companies in this marketplace. This is an unrealistic simplification, given the efforts of the major companies to create differentiation and to cater for identifiably different sub-segments within this growing marketplace (Lin, 1997). In other words, we attempt to bring order to a chaos environment in the mistaken belief that it will make things rather easier for our students and because we are more comfortable with order than chaos. Our students, then, return from their internships or from a first job after graduation with the complaint that “it was nothing like you told us to expect” – their reality was far removed from the nicely ordered homogeneity that we had presented in class as the typical hotel front desk, food service outlet or human resource motivation challenge. Simplification, while it has its virtues, is also a sin in hospitality and tourism education. It does assist students to come to terms with what might otherwise appear to be an impossibly complex environment but, perhaps, ill prepares them for the reality they will face in the workplace.

Of course, conceptual simplification is a process common to much of education, allowing learners to develop a general understanding of main principles without the burden of overload which a focus on specific cases and detail may impose. This assumes that, once basic principles have been internalised, students will be able to apply these to wider contexts and situations. This approach assumes that there are clear generalisations which can be applied to the academic or vocational field in question. This is debatable within the tourism/hospitality field for reasons of heterogeneity enunciated above. O'Connor (1996) rightly argues that a practical education (as opposed to a rather more narrowly defined vocational education) needs to equip students both for employment and "to cope in the world" (p.316). This perspective is consistent with Dewey's contribution to the definition of education as early as 1916. He argued that education:

is that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience (Dewey, 1916, pp.89-90).

It is, perhaps, an exaggeration to state that each hospitality and tourism context is unique. The branding of products and services has contributed considerably to the standardisation of products and services within some sectors of the marketplace. This process of standardised product and service delivery or what Ritzer (1993) might call McDonaldization, is fairly well developed in fast food, the airlines and budget to mid-market hotels in some countries, notably the USA but is far from a significant reality in much of Europe and elsewhere in the world. It is frequently overlooked that the average size of hotel in the UK, for example, is less than 40 bedrooms and that these establishments are, generally, independently owned and managed. The same is true with respect to most other European countries. Therefore, a relatively individual environment is an important dimension within the image of the hospitality industry with which those entering in, for example, the European context, are familiar. At an operational level, a good case can also be made for the individuality of most service encounters. This quasi-phenomenological case is based on the notion that the dynamics of each interactive situation between guest and the hospitality business are "one-off" and cannot be planned or managed with any degree of predictive certainty. Thus, to over-generalise about how things will be, as part of training or education, is to mislead the student into believing that there is a standard service response to most given situations – while this may reflect the training philosophy

of some service providers (fast food, tele-banking) it is not an appropriate foundation for a career within the wider hospitality and tourism sector.

The issues raised by this debate, in many respects, seem to represent the area of convergence or collision between service management principles and conventional human resource management. Service management advocates "idealistic" principles based on respect for the individual employee and empowerment in the workplace which, it is argued, enable front-line staff to deliver customer-sensitive and responsive service (Baum, 1995). Human resource management, while not denying the validity of such concerns, also needs to recognise the practical reality of the sectoral environment. This "collision" creates practical dilemmas with which students need to engage, such as that elaborated by Baum (1995):

- 1 Quality service requires skilled and well trained service staff.
- 2 Training and development is an expensive investment in employees.
- 3 The characteristics of the tourism and hospitality internal market are conducive to high labour turnover, especially among those staff in customer contact zones.
- 4 • If staff are going to leave anyway, it does not make sense to invest heavily in their training and development.
• Why give staff enhanced skills which will only go to make them more attractive to other employers and encourage them to leave? Thus any investment will go to benefit the competition.
- 5 • Training and development are strong motivators and can contribute to reducing attrition rates.
• Taking pride in the job and being "empowered" to deliver quality service to the customer, makes it more likely that employees will be happy in the place of work and this will reduce turnover. (Baum, 1995, pp.118-119)

As a result, nowhere is the issue of simplification (and, consequently, the temptation to generalise) more acute than in the area of human resource management. Here the contradictions are constantly evident. On the one hand, the industry rightly proclaims itself as a "people industry", dependent on the capability and enthusiasm of its front-line staff in order to deliver quality products and services with consistency. At the same time, in many countries and companies, these same front-line staff are among the poorest remunerated members of the workforce, operating hours and conditions that would be unacceptable within other industrial sectors. Likewise, the industry frequently points to the low skills base of much work within the sector, using

this to explain and, perhaps, to justify low pay, high labour turnover and recruitment problems. Yet the contradiction here is that it is these very same staff, labelled as low skilled, who are at the front-line of hospitality companies' efforts with respect to the delivery of quality service and relationship marketing, the efforts expended in order to maintain the existing customer base, tasks which demand sophisticated communication and people-related skills. A further issue here relates to assumptions which we make about the nature of work in the hospitality and tourism sector and its skills status. It has been argued elsewhere (Baum, 1996b) that the notion that the industry is one of low skills is, in part, culturally specific to those environments which share the dominant ideology and cultural assumptions of much of the international hospitality industry. Thus, a front-line position (food service, housekeeping etc.), deemed low skills in Europe or North America, may be far removed from the everyday cultural experiences of potential hospitality employees in other parts of the world, as Sulieman (1996) so eloquently argues in relation to Zanzibar:

Very few tourism-related jobs are "unskilled". Most require some understanding of the types of services required by tourists, who come from a totally different culture from coastal villagers. Many also require proficiency in a foreign language, reading and writing skills, and so on. Few rural people have adequate education, language ability or experience outside their own village environment to participate in any tourism-related enterprise other than selling natural products such as shells. There are no short-cuts to achieving such capabilities (p. 41).

For the purposes of simplicity, however, we tend to accept the generalisation that the industry is one of low skills and teach with the same assumptions in mind.

Another area worthy of consideration here is the increasingly debated topic of empowerment in the context of the hospitality and tourism industry (Lashley, 1996a; 1996b) which represents, perhaps, the best example of this contradiction in operation in the human resource domain. The foundation of a true empowerment philosophy depends on the capacity of front-line staff to make customer-satisfying decisions within, frequently, defined parameters but without reference to higher authority and within a culture where those decisions will be fully supported and accepted by the organisation. The contradiction is that the expectation is that the staff who are to be empowered are, frequently, those who are least equipped to take the requisite responsibilities by dint of:

- their education prior to joining the hospitality organisation – the industry relies heavily on those with minimal formal educational qualifications as its front-line "foot soldiers";
- their training within the job – the industry overall (although there are clear exceptions) has a poor record of providing skills and customer handling training to its front-line staff on joining and as part of an on-going development process (Department of National Heritage, 1996);
- their cultural background – in many developed countries (Australia, Europe and North America) the industry has a high level of dependency on immigrant labour (legal and illegal) to cover its front-line positions and these people may come from cultures where operating autonomously from authority is a new experience or where their own legal status makes them insecure and loathe to make decisions (Baum, 1995);
- their remuneration – the incentive to take the risks perceived to be associated with decision-making may not be there;
- their motivation – some employees, because of other commitments or as a reflection of their disposition, choose the hospitality and tourism sector because it is seen as low pressure in terms of its responsibilities and demands and are not looking to take aboard the expectations of an empowered environment; and
- their permanency or lack of it – high labour turnover in many sectors of the industry (enforced because of seasonality or other demand pressures or chosen to suit personal circumstances) means that staff may not be in position long enough to acquire the skills and confidence necessary for true empowerment and this lack of stability in the workforce, in turn, makes many organisations reluctant to adopt the empowerment route.

The above represents just a sample of the contradictory dimensions faced by those interested in hospitality and tourism from a human resource perspective and, as already indicated, these dilemmas are replicated in virtually all other areas of operations and management relating to the sector. From an educator's perspective, how do we respond to these contradictions and equip our graduates to cope with chaos rather than certainty in the real world?

Teaching order or chaos in HRM

The teaching of human resource management within hospitality and tourism programmes has, traditionally, focused on equipping students with what were perceived as the

necessary tools for effective management within the industry. The approach has been, generally, prescriptive and focused primarily on dimensions of HRM relating to the appropriate management of subordinate staff and the world of certainty which circumscribes the management – staff relationship in the hospitality industry – labour relations, employment practices, recruitment, selection and related personnel themes. Classroom practice reflects an approach within which certainty has primacy. Rather than developing approaches to the subject which are critical and questioning of industry practice, the emphasis has been on attempting to equip students for work within “the reality of the industry”, able to cope with personnel and wider staffing issues on the ground as and when they occur rather than preparing them to question the origins of these issues. Emphasising the perceived “uniqueness” of the sector does not help in this respect because the potential for learning from other sectors, especially within the service economy, can only assist students in understanding and, hopefully, rectifying some of the undesirable human resource practices which are commonplace within tourism/hospitality.

Textbooks, likewise, have generally mirrored this certainty. Boella’s (1992) five editions of what has probably been the most utilised text in the UK represents a good example of this approach – there is a hospitality industry out there and people employed in it who need to be managed – this is how to do that job. There is little compromise or debate in order to reflect diverse industry or human situations which may exist in different hotels. Likewise, Magurn’s (1977 and subsequent editions) *A Manual of Staff Management in the Hotel and Catering Industry* provides practitioners and students with specific guidance on recruitment, retention, staff welfare, staff discipline and staff relations with no compromise or variation in response to diversity of any kind within the industry. This prescriptive and, arguably, simplified approach is a tradition which has been maintained, in somewhat modified form, by Roberts (1995). There is, probably, an important role which prescription plays in preparing students for managerial responsibility within the hospitality industry. Managers have to operate within clear legal and corporate parameters and must be clear as to why the boundaries of their operational discretion lies in relating to both customers and staff. The problem lies in the frequent absence of anything else alongside prescription.

Therefore, as a consequence of this prescriptive approach to HRM teaching, students will graduate with, perhaps, some of the tools necessary to work with staff in the hospitality

and tourism industry and certainly a knowledge of the legal framework within which human resource management operates. However, they may also graduate in blissful ignorance of the wider context in which HRM for the hospitality/tourism industry operates, a context which includes understanding some of the reasons why the hospitality/tourism industry faces problems and challenges of the kind that it does. They may not understand the implications which structural diversity within the industry imposes on the management of people within the sector. They may not recognise that the human resource issues faced within the hospitality and tourism industries of different countries are not necessarily those which they face at home and which were presented, in class, as universals. They may not recognise the relationship between what they are studying in the hospitality context and the wider theoretical context and underpinning within which that body of knowledge lies – psychology, sociology, economics etc. Carmouche and Kelly (1995) argue the case for theoretical underpinning very effectively and cogently but also raise problems in the form of addressing these areas without sufficient depth of understanding. Students may not understand the social origins of much that we take for granted within the hospitality and tourism industries – Carmouche and Kelly rightly point to the class structural origins of aspects of hospitality traditions and practice and the social origins of work in the industry are also discussed by Baum (1995). Likewise, a sociological perspective on consumer groupings and consumer behaviour is important from a marketing point of view but also as a means of explaining aspects of the host-guest interaction (Baum, 1996c).

There are good sources which attempt to place the management of people within the tourism and hospitality industry in a wider socio-economic context. Riley’s (1991) contribution was one of the first (and remains probably the best) to explain some of the key issues relating to work in the hospitality industry in the context of wider labour market factors and forces. Wood’s seminal analysis (1992 and 1997) of work in the hospitality industry adopts a sociological approach and interprets research and developments in the context of wider sociological theory. These inputs tend to be used (if at all) as “wrap-up” material to be employed in the Honours year of a UK programme or at Senior level in the US, following initial focus on the prescriptive. This is, perhaps, too little, too late.

The curriculum issue, here, is one, in part, of timing in addition to the wider concern as to whether the broader issues are addressed, within programmes, at all. Giving students

“the real beef” at the end of the meal has clear attractions but certainly undermines their capacity to digest the earlier courses with full understanding. It also threatens the level and extent of potential learning within the context of their work placements or internship. It seems to these authors that hospitality students require a real and in-depth *understanding* of the industry and HRM issues within it from a theoretical and conceptual point of view before they are given operational and prescriptive models of how to operate within that environment. Failure to adopt this approach will mean that further generations of hospitality managers will emerge into the industry to perpetuate the simplistic and generalised HRM solutions adopted by their predecessors. Start with theory and context (in other words, an educational as opposed to a training approach) and, like a good aperitif, this will enable students to digest the more instructional and functional approaches to HRM which they receive later and which, together, will enable them to become effective and thinking managers in the hospitality industry.

In conclusion, therefore, this paper argues for a stronger pedagogical basis to the learning experience with which students are confronted in the human resource management area of the hospitality/tourism curriculum. While it is recognised that many programmes seek to ensure vocational application and do so in response to perceived “industry demand”, such responsiveness is, perhaps, short-sighted and limited in that it does little more than encourage the perpetuation of existing human resource management practice and makes little or no contribution to change. Human resource management teaching needs to be approached from an educational perspective which is designed to equip students with the necessary critical factors to contribute to change in this area, to respond to the wide range of concerns, some structural and some within the instrumental control of tourism/hospitality managers, which Wood (1992 and 1997) among others addresses. The starting point needs to be one of engendering understanding of why certain situations exist within the sector (low pay, high labour turnover, poor perceptions of work in the area) in the wider historical, social and economic context of tourism and hospitality. Whether graduates, on entering the industry, decide to accept the environment in which they are operating or to become agents for change, they will do so on the basis of understanding rather than as uncritical perpetuators of the status quo.

Note

- 1 Now Department for Culture, Media & Sport.

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