

Attracting and Retaining Talent

Jane Sunley said she was delighted to be chairing the first session. She said she was pleased that a people-focused session was first on the programme for the day, as it reflected the importance of the issue. Jane Sunley remarked that having the right people in a business was key for the bottom line. Jane invited the panellists to introduce themselves.

Jessica Kramer said that she was the VP for Business Development at ALICE, a platform designed to help connect hotel staff and customers. Anne Davey said she was the Group HR Director for Arora Hotels. She had previously worked for Marriot and Holiday Inn. Sally Beck, General Manager of the Lancaster, said that they were two and a half years into a three and a half year £80 million refurbishment of the hotel. During her time with the business they had entered the Time Top 100 Companies to work for, and won six Katy Awards. Stephen Cassidy introduced himself as a Senior VP and MD with Hilton UK and Ireland, and said he was also on the board of the British Hospitality Association. The focus on people was a subject close to his heart.

Stephen Cassidy said that in recent years businesses had reappraised the importance of people, which was important as hospitality was a very people centric industry. He felt it was critical that the industry focused on creating great places for people to work.

Sally Beck said that it was her stated aim to run the happiest hotel in London. It was important for people to feel respected and empowered. She emphasised the importance of people believing they were responsible for their own happiness, and then constructing a work environment in which that happiness could thrive. They had moved from having disciplinary meetings to mediations, as part of a programme to take fear out of every meeting. This had helped to build trust within the business, and foster open communication.

Jessica Kramer said that hotels were necessarily very siloed businesses, and that the aim of ALICE was to break down those silos with a platform that supported real time communication. Anne Davey said that across their four brands, whilst working within the missions and values of each, there was an aim to create an environment where the staff truly wanted to be. She felt that staff being relaxed was very important. Anne Davey believed that building a good culture was about 'action not words' and hotels needed to be doing more. It was a manager's job to keep staff happy, rather than the other way round.

Stephen Cassidy said he strongly believed that everyone deserved a great boss, and this meant that there needed to be an emphasis on attracting great leaders to the business. He noted that some workplaces had members of five different generations working in them, and that leaders needed to identify what each generation had in common. Hilton had been the fastest growing hospitality company in the world that year, and that they must be doing something right in terms of attracting talent, and having strong leadership. It had traditionally been a badge of honour to throw people in at the deep end, but that that was not the right approach.

Sally Beck spoke in favour of behavioural interviewing, and four, eight and 12 week reviews. Anne Davey said they had friend introduction programme in their recruitment which was good at promoting culture. She emphasised the importance of rewarding great employees, and creating a sense of shared ownership around the success of hotels.

Jane Sunley asked how the panel thought it best to make middle managers accountable for attracting, engaging and retaining people. Stephen Cassidy said it was important to set a tone and be clear what was expected. Hilton did global team member surveys, and general managers were paid on the basis of engagement scores.

Sally Beck said they had set up meeting where front line staff could meet the strategy team to talk about problems that were going wrong, with the larger problems then being referred to the management team. Anne Davey noted that they had seen success in rewarding people with events or trips when they were doing well, and that the focus was too often on when things went wrong, rather than when they went well. Jessica Kramer said it was important for front line staff to feel seen within a business, which could often be difficult.

Stephen Cassidy said that even bearing in mind that the point of businesses was ultimately to make money, improving the experience for team members was a key part of that, as it made it easier to deliver a great guest experience. Jessica Kramer pointed out that losing people and having to make new hires was expensive, so it made sense to focus on retention.

There was a question about what new finance tech the panel were investing in to support their finance teams. Sally Beck said they had brought in new automated purchasing software, and noted the importance of the finance team in the customer journey. Stephen Cassidy said they had done a lot of work with the finance team and trying to build the emphasis on adding value and feeling they were contributing to the whole team.

There was a question about how the panel planned to maintain and build quality in the face of rising costs, particularly the living wage. Sally Beck commented that it was not business as usual, and that they were in a 'perfect storm' of payroll costs. An important part of tackling that was building a good culture for teams. Anne David said they were always keen to pay their staff above the living wage. They tried to build a culture that showed their staff how they could develop within the business.

There was a question about what could be done to stem turnover. Anne Davey said that at Arora they were able to offer people the opportunity to move between different brands. She added that they were always eager to advance people whenever possible, rather than saying that they had to stay at a certain level for a fixed period.

Sally Beck said that the Lancaster always let people know about development opportunities, and ran leadership training that had allowed them to go from a four star to a five star hotel. She added that it was important to understand that sometimes people had to leave for their own careers and that if the culture was strong enough they might come back.

Jane Sunley asked the panel for one thought each about Brexit. Sally Beck said that support from, and for, the BHA would be important during the transition period. Stephen Cassidy said he believed the industry would be fine, and noted that growth projections for the industry remained strong. He added that many of the things the panel had discussed would be key once to making sure the industry remained strong. Anne Davey said that she believed it was important to be more creative about important, and suggested that looking at reskilling programmes in low employment areas to fill personnel shortages with UK nationals would be a good idea. Jessica Kramer said she believed the travel industry had the greatest opportunity to expose people to different values and ways of thinking.

Jane thanked everyone for their time and insight.