

Reinventing the Front Office

BY TARUN KAPOOR

Recently, I had an interesting conversation with a hotel professional—the front-office manager of a large, metropolitan hotel—who, quite frankly, was puzzled. He commented that his hotel typically used 14 guest service associates to operate its front desk stations, with two managers on duty, each supervising seven stations. He noted that although the supervising managers were former “star” GSAs who had “risen from the ranks,” they were very unpopular with the GSAs they supervised.

As he described the supervisors—dressed in business suits (not uniforms), stationed in front of the registration desk to manage guest traffic and supervise GSA performance—the problem became clear. These supervisors were perceived by the GSAs as nothing more than inspectors whose directives superseded any fiction of individual empowerment or team decision making. More importantly, the situation was a prime example of how the operating system itself

had become a barrier to productivity and employee and guest satisfaction.

Uncovering such inhibiting operating systems and performance-limiting conditions points to the need to redesign critical operating processes and build new systems on a foundation of performance management.

System Redesign Highlights

The redesign of a front-desk system begins by changing the physical appearance and positioning of employees. At the property mentioned above, all 16 employees should dress alike and work together behind the desk as two teams. But the redesign of front desk functions based on a foundation of performance management goes much further. Supervisors must become coaches, not inspectors. They should be responsible for the creation of a framework of support for the GSAs. Most importantly, performance expectations must be mutually established between each GSA and

his or her supervising manager and between each supervising manager and the front-office manager. Only by building on principles of performance management will the reinvented front-desk operating system lead to better employee performance and increased satisfaction.

Principles of Performance Management

Front-office employees must clearly understand their hotel's business objectives and departmental goals and what they or their team needs to do to reach those targets.

Successful job performance for the front office should be defined in terms of mutually agreed-upon "key performance indicators." A KPI is a measurement of a specific task undertaken by an employee related to his or her position and job responsibilities that contributes to the effectiveness of the operation. By the establishment of specific KPIs for each employee, the employee can then monitor and improve his or her own performance in a timely and effective way. They can be held accountable for their performance and rewarded for their efforts.

An underlying dynamic of performance management systems is that employees find satisfaction when they participate in determining how to meet their objectives, monitor their own progress, and are recognized for achieving objective measures of success.

Also, the redesign of the front desk using performance management principles eliminates the need for inspection and allows supervisors to coach GSAs toward their predetermined objectives and expected performance levels.

KPIs should be assigned to each employee, for each shift, and for each operating group, as a united effort toward meeting the hotel's business objectives. Expectations should be customized to each individual on the team.

It is important to use only those indicators that qualify as "SMART," that is:

Specific: A KPI must contain mutually

agreed-upon criteria that clearly articulate exactly what must be achieved in terms of operating results and how well an employee must perform. This approach avoids subjective judgments.

Measurable: A KPI must be observable, demonstrable, or measurable. Use results that are visible enough to be quantified.

Achievable: Employees must believe that targets are reasonable and that they have the ability and support to meet them.

Realistic: Employees must believe that the KPIs are a true measure of their work and that their work contributes to company objectives.

Time-dated: KPIs must be set for specific and agreed-upon time frames.

To apply these principles to the front desk, first look at the current front desk operating objectives and study PMS reports. Then, translate operational out-

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comes into performance measures.

A complete set of KPIs developed for all employees becomes the hotel's framework of accountability. Systemic accountability must be built into operating and reporting systems, and performance measures must be derived from operations results in order to accurately evaluate performance.

While formal evaluations should be scheduled regularly, a major benefit of this approach is the opportunity for employees to assess their performance daily. In the short run, self-measurement offers employees an opportunity to immediately adjust performance.

Establishing KPIs for the Front Office

1. Establish front office KPIs on a per-

room or per-occupied-room basis to reflect those performance measurements that are realistically related to operations.

2. Working from the hotel's business strategy and objectives, state what the front office needs to achieve for the hotel to move toward its objectives. Then, in clearly defined terms, state what each employee must achieve and how performance will be measured in terms of KPIs.

3. Ensure that performance expectations are agreed upon and accepted by supervisors and employees at all levels.

4. Ensure that relevant information is available to line employees and managers on a timely basis in order to allow them to meet performance expectations.

5. Limit KPIs to only a few critical key indicators—no more than seven per position.

6. Establish a suitable measure for each indicator. If percentage increase is the criterion, then report only percentages to avoid information overload.

7. Demonstrate that KPIs are actively used to support decision making by regularly communicating to all employees the hotel's progress toward achieving the property's goals and objectives. Also emphasize the

decisions based on employee input that contributed to the hotel's progress.

In reinventing your front office, the key is in creating positive processes for self-assessment, timely feedback, and opportunities for improvement; processes that make employees' performance improvement apparent; and processes that insure timely recognition of valued performance. This will create a work environment in which employees enjoy doing a better job, guest experience improves, and profitability follows. ■

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