

Lessons from the hospitality sector

Shaping the workforce of tomorrow hinges on the “character skills” we help kids develop today

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My previous work, in hospitality leadership, provided me an interesting window into the significance of the “soft” or “character” skills. Over the course of several years, I worked in the front office of a large Chicago hotel, served as assistant general manager of a hotel in central Illinois, and I even helped manage a property in Panama with attention to service training.

What I experienced really wound-up echoing what the Walt Disney Company has preached forever: We look for the right people, with the spark and the flair we want to see, and we can teach them whatever else they need to know.

I can’t tell you how many promising-looking resumes I received from people who, when you met them, simply couldn’t look you in the eye. Nothing about them screamed “pleasant, good, solid service.” Not much indicated they could interact well with customers or answer the phones well. Unfortunately, it just takes too long to train someone on the job on what is, essentially, “personality.” And in reality, you really can’t teach personality!

You’re trying to teach handshakes, you’re trying to teach smiles, you’re trying to teach appropriate pauses in conversation – you’re essentially scripting everything for them.

Thankfully, there are ways to begin shaping a

workforce with stronger skills in these areas, and to teach the mechanics of great interactions that build the “soft skills” our workforce needs. For example, DePaul University – where I attended – has found a lot of success as a business and hospitality school. Part of that success comes from emphasizing a set of “milestones” that are part of their training – for example, simple etiquette. Those lessons ended with a banquet, where the professor walked around and monitored our ability to mingle and converse. That’s a good way to go about it, considering the massive amount of business deals that happen over dinner!

Here in my own back yard each year, local businesses and schools come together for what’s called the “Great Galesburg Shake.” It’s an opportunity for high school students to get a better idea of the kinds of manners and conversational skills that are important to success in a professional environment.

Across the board, employers are starting to see the middle and high school grades are too late to begin paying attention to the development of children’s “character” skills and social-emotional strengths. Increasingly, the business community is supportive of the entire, birth-to-workforce pipeline, and shifting the focus down a few notches to what kids need from their preschool years.

