



Building a Performance Culture

Employee morale, retention and job performance all increase when staff have a role in helping to achieve business objectives. Managers and supervisors need to create work environments in which people want to work and where contributions toward achieving company goals and objectives are recognized.

Delivering a Consistently High Level of Service

Bahamas Experience Tours & Transfers

This ground transportation company has found that by focusing its attention on delivering a consistent level of service, it is improving its bottom line. Better working conditions, and more front-line training, have enabled employees to get better tips and have motivated them to help the company reach its goal of targeting a higher-end clientele.



COMPANY SNAPSHOT

Where
Bahamas

Mission statement

- To be a progressive, customer-driven organization while offering clients a wide range of high-quality products and travel and travel-related services designed to satisfy their needs and give them value for money

Type of business

Transportation

Size

- 26 luxury limos
- 6 Cadillac SUVs
- 18 motor coaches
- 12 mini vans

Ownership

- Private sector
- Not unionized

Operating

19 years

Management structure

- Owner-operated

Key products and services

- Provide round-trip airport/hotel transfers, deluxe meet and assistance services, translation, destination and event management and tours

Workforce

- 179 full-time
- 23 part-time

In-house incentive programmes

- Uniforms
- Benefit packages that include group insurance
- Bonus system, based on merit

www.bahamas experiencetours.com

The HR Challenge

The performance culture at Bahamas Experience Tours & Transfers (also simply called 'Bahamas Experience') changed for the better with an overhaul of the company's brand image, new employee uniforms and a universal script used by all employees when interacting with guests. To encourage employee buy-in to this new work culture, incentives were used.

Bahamas Experience upgraded its training programmes in order to encourage employees to deliver quality service the same way every day. Its HR challenge was to determine how to standardize the company's service delivery and make it better than its competitors.

Overview

Over the last five years, Michael Symonette, the owner of Bahamas Experience, has been aggressively changing his company's HR policies. In a push to gain new business, he has adopted some 'guerilla' marketing tactics. These are unconventional tactics that are intended to obtain maximum results with minimal resources.

Mr. Symonette has been pleased with the results he has received so far but is not completely satisfied. What he has come to realize is that HR is an important component of his company's growth strategy. Ten years ago he never would have thought that his company's success would be so dependent on HR issues. Now he realizes the importance of a greater focus on people.

Selection and retention

Mr. Symonette is proud to say that his company has a good reputation for treating employees well. For example:

- Drivers are not required to clean their own cars. Bahamas Experience is the only company that provides cleaners for its drivers.
- Instead of firing an employee who is not happy with what he/she is doing, management (after discussion with the employee) has in the past opted to move an individual to another department rather than lose the employee.
- The company has also continued to provide benefits to an employee who was on sick leave for a year. After the year, the employee returned to work.

These types of positive experiences are discussed throughout the industry, mostly through word-of-mouth, and improve the company's reputation, making it an employer of choice in the transportation and travel trade industry.

Mr. Symonette finds that there is an abundant supply of qualified workers for clerical and hospitality front-line positions. However, because the local post-secondary institutions (university and college) do not offer many courses in sales and marketing, employees qualified in this business area are in short supply.

Bahamas Experience keeps a database of possible future candidates. These are people who have sent in résumés or applied for specific positions who were not hired at the time but were felt to be good employees. To help them find employment, the company will let other operators know of these candidates. This arrangement allows worthy

applicants to find employment until Bahamas Experience has a place for them.

In addition, Bahamas Experience gives 10 scholarships (with a value of US\$10,000) to the College of the Bahamas each year. Although these students are not obliged to work for Bahamas Experience, recipients are urged to consider the company in their future employment plans. In Mr. Symonette's view, this approach gives him an inside track to securing their employment some time in the future.

When selecting a candidate, Bahamas Experience does a background check on the individual in question. In the process of hiring, the company considers what likely fit the applicant will have in the company's environment.

Overall, retention is not an issue as turnover is very low. However, some of the company's less skilled front-line occupations attract a more transient individual, so turnover there is higher.

Additional learning opportunities provided

Mr. Symonette will pay a percentage of tuition for any approved professional development course an employee chooses to take. Employees have taken motivational seminars, and some management staff members recently participated in a University of Miami session on creating a business plan. This particular course, while not directly applicable to their day-to-day work, helped managers to gain a better appreciation of what they need to know to run a business.

As part of the company's employee-wide initiative for improving its front-line training, Mr. Symonette enrolled all staff in the

Ministry of Tourism's BahamaHost and S.M.A.R.T. (Smart Marketing and Royal Treatment) programmes.

Implementation Steps:

1. The owner recognized the need for a programme to improve the company's standard of service and make it consistent in all departments and locations of the operation.
2. The HR director was added to the existing management committee, which was made up of representatives from other administrative departments. Buy-in was needed from all departments if new training programmes were going to work. Input was gathered from staff and the owner.
3. This input was incorporated into the revised training procedures. For example, front-line employees were provided with scripted statements (such as, "Welcome back to the Bahamas" and, "Hope you enjoy your stay with us") to use in various situations in order to promote the service culture.
4. The owner hired various consultants to help with specific issues, such as branding, standardizing services and preventative maintenance.
5. A performance review committee was created, which reports to the management committee on such tasks as:
 - developing and maintaining standards
 - determining new ways to enhance

the performance of individual company departments

6. The management committee saw to it that all employees took the Ministry of Tourism's training programmes, BahamaHost and S.M.A.R.T.
7. The management committee developed an orientation programme, overseen by one manager. The purpose was to ensure that all employees started out with the same information. For example, on an employee's first day, the individual is driven around to meet all of the company's employees at the airport and other locations.
8. The management committee and performance review committee meet regularly to discuss progress in each department.
9. There are regular performance reviews to monitor and support the growth of employees. Customer feedback and the results from 'mystery shoppers' (i.e., paid individuals who act as customers and report their observations) are additional ways that this company monitors the working environment.

What Was Done

Mr. Symonette recently hired a number of consultants to review company policies and operations. He wanted to enhance the existing screening and recruitment processes and to incorporate a new system of testing that better identified certain skills and

qualifications, such as computer experience. These consultants also helped the company in standardizing services such as:

- selecting a signature colour for all vehicles
- designing a new logo using the colours of the Bahamas flag
- creating the slogan, 'You Can't Beat the Experience'
- initiating preventative maintenance programmes
- making it standard policy to place water, ice, magazines and daily newspapers in all vehicles
- hiring a full-time signage consultant to keep all company signs fresh
- hiring a full-time tailor to provide custom-made uniforms for staff

Staying ahead of competitors

A major component of what positions a company ahead of its competitors is doing a better job. To make this happen, retaining good employees must be at the top of the list. The right kind of incentives help Bahamas Experience to do this.

In addition to the regular benefits provided, the company is able to offer employees discount travel and free tickets because it also owns a travel agency. Birthdays are recognized with flowers and other gifts. It is also customary that when the company gets a contract to move large groups of people, there is a celebration afterwards to thank employees for their work.

There is also an in-house 10-point system. When department heads see that an employee has provided service above and beyond the call of duty, he or she is awarded a point. When an employee has earned 10 points, he/she is eligible for a bonus prize, such as a day at a spa.

Even with all the professional opportunities and personal rewards and benefits provided, Mr. Symonette has found that staff most appreciate being brought into the decision-making process. To many, it is the best bonus of all and it helps to keep the company ahead of its competitors.

Results:

The goal of this major effort was the consistent provision of high-level service. As a result of all initiatives, including the additional training procedures that were put in place, employees are now better motivated to do their jobs.

Most customers do not bother to write letters and provide guest feedback for this type of transportation service. Since the programme has been implemented, however, the number of positive verbal comments received from clients has increased. For example, when Mr. Symonette received a call from a client telling him how pleased she was to be called by her first name in a return telephone call from one of his staff, he realized the importance of this detail. Since then he has implemented a policy of using the customer's first name in conversations throughout the company.

Staff reactions

Initially the new company procedures caused some apprehension, but this was mainly due to the fact that many people do not welcome change. When staff members saw their tips increasing, they started paying closer attention to the purpose of the procedures, and buy-in improved.

After trial and error, Mr. Symonette can say that before new HR policies or procedures take place, employees need to be consulted. Securing buy-in is important and a key part of this company's practices.

Monitoring:

Regular staff performance reviews monitor how well employees deliver service on a consistent basis. In addition, the director of HR pays special attention to customer feedback, uses mystery shoppers and notes employee attitude in all employee assessments.

To encourage employees to keep up the good work, rewards are given for positive comments from customer feedback cards. Unfavourable comments are dealt with immediately.

Mr. Symonette has observed that there is significant peer pressure among his employees on those who are not performing to the level expected.

Future HR issues

Mr. Symonette feels that the HR issue that will challenge him the most in the future is getting management buy-in to new HR policy changes. For example, all employees may not initially appreciate a mystery shopper programme, but it is a good way to assess the level of service that employees are providing. Continued efforts will need to be made to build management support for these and other similar initiatives.

Key lessons for smaller operations

For small- and medium-size operations wanting to implement a similar programme, Mr. Symonette suggests:

- Develop an aggressive HR programme to attract good staff.
- Provide perks that fit the employees' needs.
- Remember that your company's HR function is just as important as sales, marketing and operations.

Discussion Questions

1. The owner of this transportation services company reports an improving reputation as a good place to work. Which of the various HR strategies highlighted do you think might have had the largest impact on this reputation? Why?

2. The mystery shopper method is often used in the tourism/hospitality industry to gauge levels of customer service. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of such a system? How could the disadvantages be reduced?

3. One of the successful techniques used by Bahamas Experience is to ensure that the appropriate messages for customers are scripted and are followed by staff. What would you do to ensure that staff members are comfortable with and accepting of this approach?