
Who's the Boss?: Millennials managing across generations in the hospitality industry*

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Objectives of the Case Study

The main learning outcome of this case will be to enhance hospitality undergraduates' understanding of the benefits and challenges of working in and managing a multi-generational workforce. By the conclusion of this case analysis, activities, subsequent assignments, and assessment, the student should be able to:

- Define the four generational cohorts currently in the workforce.
- Describe several key events and issues which occurred in each generation.
- Analyze the typical characteristics of each cohort as they relate to the key events and issues.
- Evaluate the challenges and potential solutions Gen Y managers might encounter in leading the various generations presently in the hospitality workforce.

Introduction

A generation within a population is often referred to as a cohort, or a group of persons born in the same time period, exposed to similar social and historical events, which shape the critical stages of their lives (Schaie, 1965; Solnet & Kralj, 2011). Due to a lack of agreement on the definitive events and time periods of each generational cohort, the literature often reports conflicting generational time periods (Solnet & Kralj, 2011). For the purpose of this case study, the Millennial generation, also known as Gen Y, is a generation of persons defined herein as born between 1980 and 2000. A much larger cohort outpacing their predecessors, Gen X—those born between 1964 and 1979, the Millennials are quickly reaching the population size of the Baby Boomers, or those born between 1946 and 1964 (Solnet & Kralj, 2011; Young et al., 2013). 2012 generational demographics describe the workforce consisting of 5% from The Greatest Generation (those born before 1946), 38% Baby Boomers in the workforce, 32% of workers from Generation X, and 25% from the Millennial generation (Catalyst, 2012).

By 2020, Millennials will consist of approximately 50% of the American workforce and 75% of the global workforce by 2030 (Meister, 2012). The entrance of the growing numbers of Millennials into the hospitality workforce is predicted to impact the service orientation

of a hospitality organization, thus calling for a better understanding among all generational groups as to how to achieve organizational objectives united as a team.

Background

Gladys graduated from college two years ago and was very fortunate to secure a position in a hotel manager-training program for a large corporate hospitality firm. When she first arrived, she was very excited to learn that there were several other college graduates accepted into the same training program. For two years she and her friends rotated positions within the large hotel property, working the front desk, sales and marketing, food and beverage, catering and banquets, housekeeping, and engineering. The manager trainees compared notes about the different departments, giving each other helpful hints to navigate bosses and fellow employees in each new environment. For the most part, Gladys enjoyed a fair amount of success with those managers and line level employees within each department and relied on the advice and tips from her friends in the hotel.

Gladys was a diligent employee and was recognized early as a potential leader among the existing department managers; therefore, when a permanent manager position was offered to her from the food and beverage department, Gladys quickly accepted the position as restaurant manager in one of the five outlets in the hotel. This was the big break she had been waiting for, increasing her salary substantially as well as acquiring added benefits within the hotel chain, including the potential to move up within a year to a sister property. An added benefit to working in food and beverage was that Gladys would still work with her friends who had yet to achieve official manager status. Luckily these friends were assigned line level supervisor status in the same outlet Gladys would become restaurant manager.

Challenges in Leadership

Moving into a leadership position so early in her career created some ambivalent feelings for Gladys, but she felt she had the support of her manager-in-training colleagues, who would help ease the transition. She knew the Director of Food and Beverage, Philippe, who was old enough to be her father and who had the reputation of a taskmaster, would have high expectations. Other than challenges presented by Philippe, Gladys was certain she could find a way to motivate and lead her newly assigned restaurant staff.

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* Second Place Winning Case Study

Approximately one week into her new position as restaurant outlet manager, Gladys received a text from one of her previous manager-in-training peers, who had recently been moved to supervise line level employees in the restaurant. Carmen casually texted that she would be an hour late, due to being stuck in traffic on her way home from the beach. In addition, Carmen asked if Gladys would punch her timecard because Carmen was one warning away from being fired for a similar offense. Later, the same day, another of Gladys' peers did not show up for work altogether, and texted Gladys at the end of the day that he would explain himself tomorrow. Gladys was caught in between remaining loyal to friends and having to make the difficult decisions to enforce departmental and corporate policy, which included written warnings for tardiness and termination for falsifying timecards and not reporting to a scheduled shift. Considering she didn't feel comfortable yet with reprimanding her friends, Gladys decided to give both of them unofficial verbal warnings. Unfortunately, on this same day, the restaurant experienced an abnormally high volume of customers due to a conference in town and the dining room service quality suffered, as indicated on guests' comment cards. Frustrated with the situation, Gladys decided to officially write both friends up after the fact, creating uncomfortable feelings and straining these personal relationships.

Gladys enjoyed her role as restaurant outlet manager for many months. One day, in preparation for the busy season, Philippe hired several new staff members who were placed to work in Gladys' outlet. She was instructed to quickly train these new employees and position the more qualified ones into supervisory roles to prepare for the coming busy months. Although Gladys was relieved to receive 8 new employees, she was apprehensive when she learned that one was old enough to be her parents' age and another was over the age of her grandparents. She had never worked side by side with older people, as she only had experience working for older bosses. What was even more unnerving was the fact that both of these individuals had several years of restaurant experience in high-end hotel environments. Gladys could not imagine how she would manage these two very experienced employees, however she did feel confident managing persons her own age.

Jorge and Esmeralda

Jorge was 40 years old and had two children in college. He was the former owner/operator of a nearby bistro, which he owned for over 20 years. Jorge was well known in the community and had a following of loyal customers. A few years ago, Jorge had to sell his popular business due to some health related issues, which put him in the hospital for several months. When Jorge recovered from his ailments, he was a wealthy man, but was bored. A friend of his suggested he work part time at a local restaurant in a high-end hotel, and Jorge was inspired by the idea. While he loved the restaurant business, he knew he could no longer take on ownership and operations, but he could work 35-40 hours per

week in a supervisory function. Plus, he still had his connections and he knew his fans would follow him.

Esmeralda worked as a pastry chef all her life. She was classically trained by the best pastry chefs in Europe and had enjoyed an illustrious international career among 5 star resorts and world-class hotels. Esmeralda was retired, and traveled for years with her husband all over the world. Sadly, after he passed away, Esmeralda no longer wished to travel alone and decided to move closer to her children and grandchildren. One day when she was browsing the Internet at home, she noticed a job opening in a local well-established hotel for a part time pastry chef. She thought to herself, why not? The position was offered in a fine dining outlet of the hotel and included the responsibilities of preparing the cakes and frozen desserts. Esmeralda never really stopped making pastries since the beginning of her retirement, as she was often contracted to make wedding cakes in her spare time.

Working Together-Jorge

Despite her initial apprehension, after about a month working with Jorge and Esmeralda, Gladys grew to enjoy working with these highly competent individuals. In fact, she looked forward to those days when they were scheduled and often sought their advice on menu items, service quality, and suggestions for employee engagement. This was not to say Gladys did not have difficult times managing these employees. For example, when the wine program and cellar project was initiated to organize the inventory and redesign the wine list, Gladys handed over a large portion of the project to Jorge. However, she was disappointed when Jorge became irritable throughout the project. After all, she supported him by asking for the daily status of the project, suggesting several iterations of the wine list, and provided constant feedback and alternatives to Jorge's decisions.

Unfortunately, Jorge never mentioned to Gladys that he was a Level 1 Sommelier. It was something he pursued many years ago while operating his own restaurant, but could never follow through due to the financial demands of his family. Jorge was committed to sending his children to the best universities he could afford; thus his own dreams would have to wait. It wasn't until Gladys entrusted him to the wine cellar project that he recalled his passion for wine. With all of his experience, wine training, and wisdom, why couldn't Gladys just leave him alone to do the job he was assigned? Why did she keep pestering him with little details and daily status inquiries?

Working Together-Esmeralda

Gladys appreciated Esmeralda's amazing pastry skills and ability to unify employees both in the front and back of the house. Gladys was aware that Esmeralda was a part time employee, and so Gladys did not put pressure on Esmeralda. For example, Gladys did not bother Esmeralda with trivial matters like attending the pre-shift servers' meetings. Demonstrating her own managerial competence, Gladys

chose to introduce the new, updated dessert menu which was well under way and ready for the high season, except for one outstanding item. Philippe recommended a cheese course in the dessert menu, but Gladys was having difficulty with the execution and could not convince, nor influence the servers to sell cheese plates after the entrée. Philippe grew frustrated with Gladys because she was unable to implement this simple menu improvement and counted this against her in a recent performance review. No matter how hard she tried, Gladys could not gain the buy-in of her employees in the dining room for this dessert initiative, nor did she seek the advice of her senior staff.

One evening, Esmeralda spoke privately with Jorge, confiding in him that she felt excluded from the pre-shift servers' meetings. Esmeralda enjoyed listening to the feedback from the servers as to how she could make improvements to the desserts. She also enjoyed teaching and training the servers about fine dining desserts and pastries. Esmeralda knew that "up-selling" could influence patrons if the servers were properly informed about the details of her desserts. Jorge admired Esmeralda for her vast product knowledge, but even more so, he valued Esmeralda's ability to unify a team for a common purpose. After all, Esmeralda had traveled the world and had worked in many cultures. She knew how to work with and for many types of people. Jorge promised to speak with Philippe on her behalf and express potential solutions for teaching the servers how to up-sell the dessert items.

Discussion

One year after her promotion to outlet restaurant manager as a result of her participation in the manager training program, Gladys felt a sense of accomplishment. Unfortunately, when her annual performance review was conducted, she was shocked to learn about her poor ratings earned as the leader of her outlet. Philippe informed Gladys that although her financials were all in order, her employees were unhappy and he explained some of the challenges on behalf of the staff. He expressed to Gladys that while Jorge felt micromanaged, Esmeralda wanted to be more included in the operation. Philippe added that perhaps Gladys did not understand the nuances of managing a multi-generational team, because on occasion, Jorge was on the verge of quitting. Most shocking to Gladys was when she learned that Esmeralda felt that she was not making a difference in her job. Finally, Gladys' former peers voiced dissatisfaction with her performance as a new boss and said she was unable to lead with conviction.

When asked about her own perspectives on her performance, Gladys refused to acknowledge these accusations. Instead of trying to understand and learn from her mistakes, Gladys attributed this negativity to envy and a lack of support of a new, young manager. Unfortunately, because Gladys would not acknowledge these criticisms as valid, Philippe put her on probation with an action plan for immediate improvement.

While shocked, to a certain extent, Gladys never imagined these interpersonal and intergenerational challenges would have such an effect on worker satisfaction. As part of the Millennial generation, Gladys was aware she liked to work in teams and felt strongly she promoted this team spirit among her staff. Recently in the news, Gladys heard that Millennials were comparable to the Baby Boomer generation in that they both shared similar values. Moreover, so much was being said in the media about the promises of her generation and the way they will lead change in the world. She really thought she understood how to lead a team of workers successfully. How could they not feel the same?

Discussion Questions

- Who are the current generations in the hospitality workforce today?
- What are the key events and major issues of each generation?
- How did these events and issues lead to the defining characteristics of each cohort?
- What are the best strategies for managing hospitality workers in each generation?
- Why is it important to cultivate a multi-generational workforce? What are the benefits to the operation?
- What are some of the defining characteristics of both Jorge's and Esmeralda's generations which have shaped how they both like to work and be led (Appendix B)? Research one of the events from each generation (Appendix A) and link how this event might have produced a defining generational characteristic.
- How could Gladys have better managed her Gen Y peers, Jorge, and Esmeralda? What could Gladys have done to improve the supervisor-subordinate relationship between herself and employees from the Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y?
- How would you create and organize a mentoring program for Gladys?

Additional Readings Assigned

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