

The Guest

R E P O R T

Service excellence

The character of service... searching for winning traits

Amidst recent debates about the delivery of character education in arenas such as the Broward County School system, consider the character traits of service and when and where they are developed. In fact, last year's legislature believed character development should start quite early with a mandate for character education in all Florida elementary schools.

With the diminishing workforce, escalating employee turnover and increasing guest demands, finding those individuals who DO possess winning character traits will lead to the exceptional service that makes a difference. The question then becomes, do you find, develop or nurture character and how early do you start? Are traits identified by school officials from the state and Broward County including respect, honesty, responsibility, self-control, tolerance, kindness, citizenship and cooperation similar to those qualities we search for in service professionals and front line staff?

The connection may be stronger than we think. Earlier this month, the Academy of Travel and Tourism in Miami honored business and education sponsors at the "Breakfast of Champions." The Academy, one of two pilot programs begun in 1986 as a collaborative effort by American Express and Miami-Dade County Public Schools, provides high school students with a specialized tourism curriculum and hands-on experiences in hospitality.

Based on the success of those pilots, there are now over 140 Academies of Travel and Tourism in the United States.

As noted by Bill Talbert, President of the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, tourism continues to be the No. 1 industry in Greater Miami and remains of critical importance to Florida's future economic development. Maria Sastre, vice president of Customer Satisfaction for United expects an 18 percent growth rate in tourism by 2005. The economic, cultural and social impact of the people in those jobs is and will be critical.

Nurturing the character traits of the young people who will fill those jobs is a responsibility today's hospitality leaders must consider. Attitude, critical in service delivery, reflects the essence and understanding of each individual's character. Attitude, in action and by example, enhances that character. Academy advisors and hospitality leaders provide mentoring and hands-on application of quality service traits through internships and shadowing specific tourism roles.

Traits such as respect, honesty, responsibility and kindness are reinforced through live interaction with co-workers and guests. Seeing how managers respect and treat their employees inspires students in their own management development and guest philosophies. Honest communications, whether eye contact, phone skills or departure greetings, reinforce the importance of sincere service delivery.

Responsibility, through hands-on roles and participation in the

many facets of hospitality, preview and prepare students for the leadership necessary for service excellence.

Traits such as cooperation, self-control and tolerance are further enhanced by the Academy's instruction in destinations (geography) and foreign language.

Laments about poor service delivery are often sourced to misunderstandings of culture, diversity and language. These three traits are also key to delivering consistent service at every touch point of a guest's experience by working as a team and managing the difficult moments.

Roger Cuevas, Superintendent of Schools for Miami-Dade County Public Schools, emphasized how important real life scenarios and character development, through mentorships, apprenticeships and training, are to prepare tomorrow's workforce and to ensure tourism remains a powerful source of revenue to South Florida. Cuevas, who now oversees 329 schools, pointed to his own hospitality roots and life experience as a baker and cake decorator in Coral Gables and the Grove.

The search for and example of winning character traits clearly begins in our own backyard, through committed involvement to nurture our next hospitality generation. This is exemplified by the following Academy champions: Stephen M. Beatus from United Airlines; Stuart Blumberg, president of the Greater Miami and The Beaches Hotel Association; Bob Dickinson, president of Carnival Cruise Lines; Keith Harrell, regional sales manager of South Florida for American Airlines; Arthur Hertz, chief executive officer and chairman of Wometco Enterprises; Victor Lopez, divisional vice president of Hyatt Hotels and Resorts; Donald G. McGregor, president of Johnson and Wales University; Ana Palmer, district director account development for American Express TRS; Bill Talbert from the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau and Sherwood M. Weiser, chairman and chief executive officer of Carnival Resorts and Casinos.

Whether intentional or not, the roles these individuals play benefit recruiting and retention strategies as well.

Finding the best employees and keeping them, especially when human capital is at a premium, requires proactive involvement and development of winning character traits before candidates show up. That's good for business.

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