



Case Study: Pan Pacific Whistler



Lloyd Daser runs two Pan Pacific Hotels (sister hotels just 500 metres apart) in Whistler, British Columbia. One of these hotels, the Village Centre, was rated the number one resort by *Condé Nast Traveler* in 2017. The team at the Pan Pacific Whistler consistently delivers reliable and responsive service and receives customer satisfaction survey results and social media rankings in the ninety-plus percentile. They achieve this through ongoing training, coaching, and embracing their own brand standards. However, where they excel is in building relationships.

I've stayed in both hotels, and the rooms and the service genuinely make you feel like you are in a home away from home. Given my experience, I wanted to know how they always manage to stick the landing and make it such a special experience. What "interventions" do they use to ensure the stay is personalized? How do they use coaching and observations? How do they use technology to foster relationships? The answer to these questions might surprise you.



Daser and his team use coaching, technology, and interventions to build relationships, but that's only a tiny part of the story. Virtually all of their relationship building happens because they have built the right environment. As Daser states, "We create a culture of family for employees and customers. In terms of the guest experience/relationship building, the focus is on each customer as if they were a guest in our

home (as opposed to a hotel). It is a different type of experience and mindset, and great for building lasting relationships.” Now, this sounds like something every GM of a hotel might say, but read on to learn how Daser actually builds this culture.

“When I opened the Pan Pacific Kuala Lumpur International Airport hotel, most of the people we hired were from the small villages around the airport outside of Kuala Lumpur. They had never flown on or even been on an airplane. It was impossible for them to even begin to understand how our arriving guests would feel after getting off a long-haul flight. So we did a deal with Malaysia Airlines to use their training facility and a full-sized airplane cabin, which they had on site to train their cabin crew, as part of our training. We put all of our team through a simulated flight where they had to sit on the airplane for sixteen hours like a real passenger. They got to watch movies, take advantage of other in-flight services, and use the toilets . . . just like a real passenger. There was a lot of fun and excitement at first, but by hour sixteen they were more than ready to get off and had a fabulous appreciation (without ever leaving the ground) of how our guests felt when they arrived at the hotel. We ended the day with everyone getting to exit down the emergency slide!”

Is this not the best story you have ever heard? This is how you build relationships—by genuinely putting yourself in your customers’ shoes (or, in this case, airplane slippers). Great service providers don’t think *about* their customers, they think *like* them. This is a great example of how to think *like* them.

Essentially, Daser leads through cultural norms. This is where interpersonal relationships and teamwork regulate employee behaviour. Employees develop the means for their own decision-making and initiatives through these cultural norms. This method of leadership can work extremely well in service contexts.

Leading through values

To build relationships, leaders must lead from the front. If you are not willing to work extremely hard to build relationships with employees and customers as a servant leader, then the culture will never support the extra mile required to do this better than any other competing hotel. The idea is that successful service businesses are built on the alignment between target customers’ needs and the design of the firm’s operating system. In businesses which depend on human interaction for success—which is most service businesses—the types of beliefs and values instilled by the leaders are vital, because this determines the success of the operating system. If you want service workers to build relationships with the “heart and head,” then you have to engage with their own unique talents, aspirations, and needs. No one does this better than Lloyd Daser.

I asked Daser how he builds the connections between leaders and their direct reports. He has a powerful mindset and approach in this regard: “If a leader treats each of his/her reports much like one of his/her own children, providing the same guidance, support, and unconditional love (including tough love), they would be a much better leader (unless they are also a lousy parent!). I actually opened a hotel in Malaysia where we built our whole culture around this. We built a birth canal where I ‘gave birth’ to all of my executive team, who in turn gave birth to their managers, and down the line . . . complete with birth certificates. It was certainly an ice breaker for new employees (especially as their new boss screamed in obvious birthing discomfort as they made their way through the birth canal), but it really helped instill family values in our team in a country where the family structure and support system were very strong. I was affectionately known as Grandpa (as opposed to Mr. Daser) by all of our staff, and our relationships with each other very much resembled parenting in all we did.”

In terms of leading from the front in building relationships with customers, Lloyd continues, “At the Pan Pacific Kuala Lumpur International Airport hotel, I also had my cellphone programmed and labelled on a speed dial button on the guestroom phone. All guests had direct access to me 24/7 (as they would if they were staying in my home). My life was miserable for six months, but as we worked through their issues and the employees knew that every guest had unfettered access to me, they quickly learned what my hot buttons were and what was important. It sent a great message and built many lasting relationships with our customers, because they knew we stood behind what we promised, and they valued direct

access to the GM, because they knew any issues would be resolved. By the end of my tenure there, I think I received more calls from guests extolling the virtues of our hotel and associates than anything else.”

This is a great example of how to be a servant leader.

Building mindset

Ensuring employees are always in the right mindset is a key task for leaders. The day that employees slip back into what is best for them rather than best for the customer is a very bad day for the organization. This usually happens when leaders lose their way and focus on growth and profitability or become arrogant through success. There is no better example than Starbucks, when after its runaway success from 1992 to 2006, the company stumbled and nearly went bankrupt. As Howard Schultz, founder and CEO of Starbucks, says, “We had lost sight of our shared purpose and our guiding principles, in which growth and success began to cover up mistakes, and a disease set into Starbucks. That disease, hubris.” A major job of the leader is to create a culture where that hubris toward the customers never sets in.

Lloyds Daser talks about how he creates this mindset. “When I opened the Pan Pacific Glenmarie Resort, I bought a life-sized wooden carving of a golfer and named him Vic (very important customer). We put him in our cafeteria and built our culture around it. Everything we did focused on Vic. When someone made a mistake, I simply had to ask them, ‘What would Vic think?’ If they had a question or needed guidance, I would simply ask them, ‘What would Vic do/say?’ It made them reflect and they generally came up with the appropriate response on their own.” He continued, “When I was at the Pan Pacific Vancouver as front office manager, I set up the Captains Club. We took a picture of any guest who had been with us three times and built a Plexiglas grid in the back corridor where we posted these pictures. We would move their pictures to an ‘arriving today/in-house/checking out’ section so the front desk team (and anyone else passing by) would know who was arriving, in-house, or leaving. Guests were constantly amazed how staff members, even new ones whom they had never met before, were able to recognize them by name.”

These examples are two ways to keep the mindset of the employee going. These interventions are critical because during busy times when employees are exhausted, these methods can remind an employee why they are there and what the purpose of the company is.

Building relationships through embracing mistakes

Many relationships are built by handling mistakes well. Ignoring service errors or becoming defensive when things go wrong (even if the customer has caused the problem) is a great way to destroy trust in the blink of an eye. Conversely, you can build even *stronger* relationships when complaints occur.

As Daser offers, “I think some of the best and strongest relationship we built with customers over the years here in Whistler, and at other hotels I have run, is through service recovery. We screw up in some small (or often not so small) way, and the manner in which you treat the situation in making it right in the customer’s eyes can earn you a customer for life. Again, it is about establishing a connection or a bond with your guest.”

Building relationships within the community: Adopting the Whistler Experience

Lloyd Daser and his team are also proactive and involve themselves in growing the Whistler Experience within the community (see case study). Pan Pacific, being an internationally branded hotel, has its own brand vision, purpose, and values. But because it wanted to play a role in driving the community forward, it ensured that it integrated the Whistler Experience concepts (3Rs and TOFU, for example) within its own brand vision, purpose, and values, to align its culture and understanding with that of Whistler.

This shows great leadership at the resort level, and Lloyd Daser himself sits on the Whistler Chamber of Commerce board. This is critical because in order to provide great experiences to the customer, you must realize you are one part of an ecosystem and many others are delivering part of that experience too. By Daser and his team adopting the Whistler Experience, they are creating consistency and momentum within the larger community. This leadership has meant that others have followed because of them.

Building the emotional connection

At the end of the day, relationships are built through an emotional connection with the customer. As Daser states, "All associates are empowered with one objective in mind, to make sure the customer has a memorable vacation. It is important to note that building relationships is not just a general manager or director of sales function or responsibility." Perhaps it is the leader's responsibility to create an internal culture that empowers Power of Relationships and encourages this, but Daser believes it must be everyone's responsibility, including his.

He adds, "To create responsibility, associates are empowered to spend up to \$100 on any guest, at any time, to 'make a guest's day.' Good businesses are reliable and responsive, but great businesses excel at building relationships. This is largely achieved by being connected with your guests and doing or providing something that is unexpected, that leaves a lasting connection or memory with the customer."

He continues, "Relationship building starts from the moment a guest calls to make a reservation. All associates take bookings (not just the reservations department) and take ownership of the guest and reservation (TOFU). Pre-arrival interactions offer assistance with booking activities, answering questions, and helping guests plan their itinerary and vacation." When in-house, associates are encouraged to interact with the guests at every opportunity, search out and look for opportunities to build relationships, and respond to them. As Daser says, "You have to listen with intent to your customer. Things like recognizing birthdays and anniversaries are easy, but it is much more than this. The hotel hosts an *après* hour daily during ski season where the management team, including me, provides the service and interacts with their guests, builds relationships and looks for opportunities to connect." If you want employees to build strong relationships, lead from the front and they will mirror your behaviour.

The hotel has so many examples of what an empowered workforce can achieve. One anecdote Daser told me highlights the ownership taken by employees at Pan Pacific Whistler: "This story involves a family who had been visiting for a week and unfortunately was stricken with illness for most of their stay. They had one day left of their vacation and were excited about finally getting out for a day of skiing. They were asking the front desk about what time to get up due to the queues on a weekend morning, especially given the forecast was for fresh snow overnight and blue skies in the morning. The guest service agent arranged Fresh Track tickets [early access to ski lifts with free breakfast on the mountain] on behalf of the hotel. Included was a personal note that told them we were happy they were feeling better, and for them to go up ahead of the mountain opening, have breakfast on the top of the mountain, and get in a couple of runs in the morning before any of the regular pass holders reached the top." Imagine the relationship this exemplary service built.

By leading through values and cultural norms, Daser shows us how strong relationships can be built without much need for gimmicks, customer databases, and employee of the month awards. By leading from the front (or, in this case, within the community) and building strong relationships with the employees themselves, firms know that employees will work hard to always build the emotional connection with the customers and even recover from mistakes when things go wrong, without anyone needing to micro-manage them. Without anyone breathing down their necks, they can bring their best to work and show the customers they *really* are at the centre of everything that they do.