

Case Study:



Creating a stronger service culture

In 2015, Miriam MacDonald, the newly appointed head of the Whistler Blackcomb Service Project for the more than 4,000 staff, was concerned about how to embed the new Whistler Experience program—built on the Moments of Power and the 3Rs—without losing any momentum. After all, Whistler Blackcomb (WB) was already the number one ski resort in North America, as voted by *Ski Magazine* readers. The stakes were extremely high.

The first thing MacDonald did was meet the manager of employee experience and the general managers for sales, who had managed the trial program the season before with great success. With their insights and suggestions, she put together a service team of twelve managers from across WB, each representing a division, and created a project timeline for the year with an approved budget. Both front- and back-of-house teams were involved. For the first year, WB focused on the 3Rs and the first two Moments of Power: Power of Expertise and Power of Relationships. MacDonald is also part of the Whistler Chamber of Commerce Service Committee. Working with that team, MacDonald shared successes and challenges at WB.

Whistler Blackcomb sent materials to each service team member and asked them to customize them for their departments. Service team members also shared information and training plans amongst themselves. Whistler Blackcomb then offered customized training to 200 staff in their own fall training, beyond the public workshops offered as part of the Whistler Experience. The trainees were a cross-section of supervisors and managers, and it was a great way to get everyone on the same page. MacDonald had posters designed and created for all back-of-house staff areas. They introduced this new service program in the first-season staff orientation sessions and return season staff sessions, outlining why they believed it would be more effective, useful, and positive for both employees and guests.

This behavioural framework was then used by every team across WB on a regular basis. Whenever there was a team meeting, the 3Rs framework was used to talk about key service concepts and how each team could bring them alive in their area every day, providing a focus on service.

Alignment

Probably the greatest success was getting all areas of WB to buy in to the program; as MacDonald said, “There was a strong culture of service before, especially among front-line employees. This program broadened the focus to *all* divisions. The awareness of service belonging to everyone, not just front-facing staff, was one of the main points I spoke to and focused on.”

This alignment offered a new sense of purpose and vision. The service team and MacDonald met each month for two years to execute the 3Rs and other aspects of great service (for example, handling problems). MacDonald created an agenda for each monthly meeting with updates on their current service score rankings, goals, and guest comments about WB's staff. Each team discussed what was working and what was not in their areas. They also brainstormed and shared recognition ideas that worked with their teams.

This new approach created a stronger service culture across the whole company, not just front-of-house. Also, by sharing their experiences with other Whistler businesses at Whistler Chamber of Commerce meetings, WB built a sense of community within the village.

Servant leaders

Servant leaders, like MacDonald, focus on the needs of others, especially team members, above their own. Leaders at WB acknowledge other employees' perspectives, give them the support they need to complete their work (hence their new focus on coaching) and achieve personal goals, involve them in decisions where appropriate, and build a strong sense of community. These changes led to higher engagement at Whistler Blackcomb, more psychological safety, and stronger relationships with team members and other stakeholders.

WB usually had two profound "dips" in service scores over a ski season (looking at previous ski season data), but rather than beat employees over the head with the importance of delivering service consistently over the whole twenty weeks, they took another approach. In their first year, MacDonald identified some later weeks in the spring season and focused her efforts to drive change then. As MacDonald states, "We created a voucher package for each manager and senior leader (ninety of them) to carry with them and recognize great work within their teams and among other WB divisions. These vouchers were good for a snack or beverage. The direction we gave to each leader was to be out and about with your teams, actively recognizing all staff."

Whistler Blackcomb succeeded in maintaining consistent scores and avoiding the service dip. For the second year, they addressed the other "dip" area—the early season, roughly around the third week of operations. Again, applying the same strategy as they had for spring, vouchers were created and distributed to all leaders with the same message. In this way, WB successfully maintained their early season scores and avoided the dip. The team at WB used leadership to generate engagement rather than flexing their punitive muscle.



Servant leaders recognize employees meaningfully

Another important characteristic of a servant leader is the way they recognize employees who are doing a great job. Whenever you celebrate outstanding service, you put the employees forward rather than the leaders. Whistler Blackcomb took a unique approach with the roll-out of the new program.

MacDonald described this new approach: "I didn't want to take from the many recognition programs we currently have in place that are successful, so I created a new event to focus just on celebrating service. I created the 3Rs' Service Winners Lunch."

To be nominated for this monthly lunch in one of the on-hill fine-dining restaurants, peers, supervisors, or a manager had to fill out a ballot online. These votes went to the service team and were taken to the divisional managers' meetings to choose a winner. Larger divisions got to choose two or three winners each month. MacDonald then sent out individual invites to the lunch.

A member of the senior leadership team attended and everyone was paid for the afternoon. Their photos were featured in the WB staff newsletter each month.

Results

Given that WB was already the number one ski resort in North America, the improvements in service scores have been noteworthy. Any improvement, when you are the best already, is excellent news and shows a growth mindset in action. They achieved their best score ever in the 2016–17 season with over 80 percent for employee service for the first time. This is a 7 percent improvement in four years.

The future

MacDonald has formulated two ideas to improve. Some divisions (snowmaking, for example) found the training schedule in the fall clashed with their huge volume of work at that time. MacDonald wants to get to these divisions in the future.

Also, some parts of WB had been proactive and created customized courses, such as for private ski instructors. These have been really effective, more so than the regular service training for WB as a whole. Budget allowing, MacDonald wanted to offer department-specific training, so WB could really drill down in each division.

This relentless focus on continuously improving service over the long haul sums up the customer fixation of MacDonald and WB. You can never stand still with your service culture because to stay at number one, you have to be as hungry as if you were number two. That hunger is what WB shows through their approach. Every. Single. Day.

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