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“The Six Touchstones” A Model for Hospitality Students

By Christopher Muller and Michael Oshins

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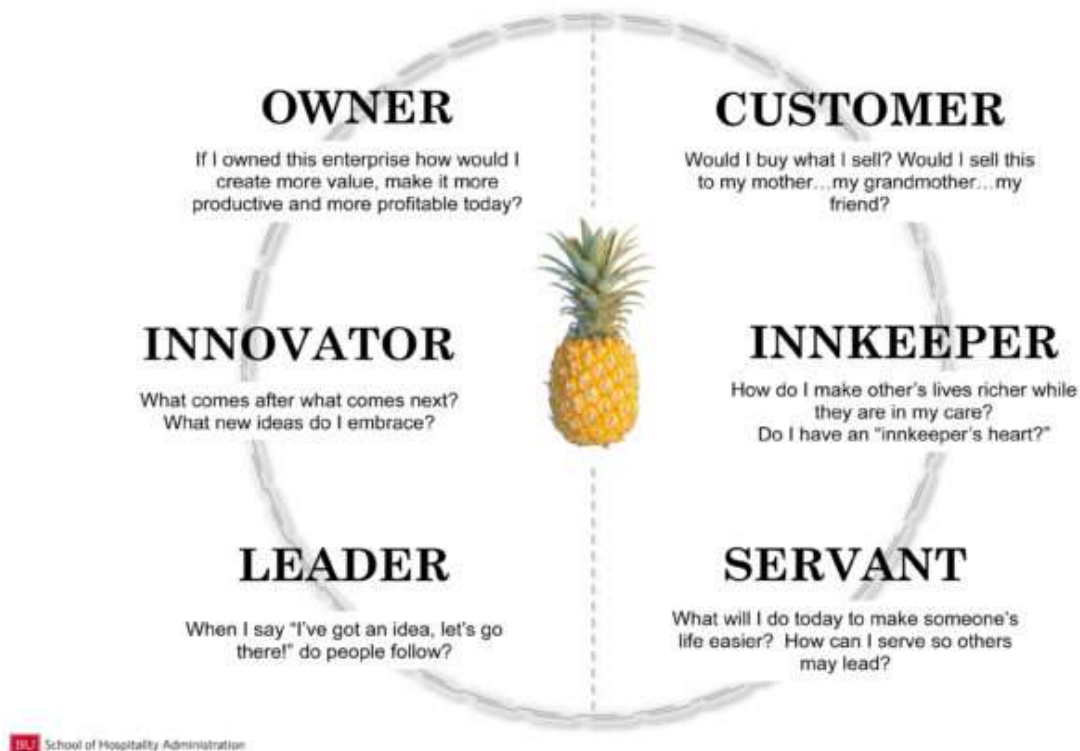
By Christopher Muller and Michael Oshins

Hospitality management education requires many different perspectives to be considered, given the broad array of pedagogies used throughout a four-year curriculum. With some planning—and, sometimes, with a bit of serendipity—simple ideas may resonate with students well beyond the time they spend in a classroom.

In previous Boston Hospitality Review issues, we have identified several [methods that may be applied so students are able to cope with, embrace, and even leverage change in the hospitality industry](#). Included in this has been a number of strategies and tactics, which may include such tested practices as engaging creativity, adopting new habits, reframing theories, and challenging accepted paradigms. Along with these, the practice of self-reflection becomes a powerful tool for adapting to the realities of our constantly changing industry.

As part of our continuing faculty discussions on an ever-changing curriculum, a few years ago we adopted a model for our students to consider in their transformational journey. We call it simply “The Six Touchstones.” An application of this model is one way for a student to relate to the hospitality industry on a personal level, accepting that they may hold multiple complex perspectives concurrently yet still be focused and effective.

THE SIX TOUCHSTONES



Early in their first semester, we present “The Six Touchstones” to all incoming freshmen at the Boston University School of Hospitality. Other faculty reinforce it in their courses throughout the four-year curriculum. It appears again as a part of the capstone leadership course in their senior year. We believe that when our students graduate, understanding, applying, and ultimately internalizing “The Six Touchstones” will provide them with the balance required to enter the industry as a well-prepared hospitality manager.

Just as many hospitality organizations have guiding principles that become important enough to write down in the form of a mission statement or a credo, we hope that, over time, “The Six Touchstones” will take a foundational place in our shared conversation.

To introduce the discussion, we ask that each student to consider the six individuals named on the model and then to “think like...”

An Owner

Hospitality is, at its core, an entrepreneurial business, one with a strong center built upon operational success and the hard work it entails. Universally, we hold in high esteem the people who have put “their names and reputations in their businesses.” Students are reminded that there was a person, a founder, an owner, named Marriott, Hilton, Kimpton, Brinker, Puck, or Meyer. So first, we ask the students to “think like an owner.” This, we suggest, means that every day when they go to work they need to consider the questions, “If I owned this business, how would I add more value to the enterprise? If it

were my place, what would I do differently?” The goal is to first instill a sense of ownership at work and the willingness to act on that sense, and secondly, to implant a future desire to be entrepreneurial.

A Customer

In balance to this, we then ask students to “think like a customer.” There are no hospitality enterprises without paying guests. Thinking like a customer presents the student with the mindset to ask themselves, “Would I buy what I sell?” Walking through the metaphorical front door of any business with the eyes of a first-time patron requires them to consider, “Would I sell this product, this service, this room, or this meal to my friends...my mother...my grandmother?” It also requires them to consider who in fact their customer is: is it the paying guest or the service employee who interacts with that guest on the front line? In the simplest of ways, students are given the opportunity to consider whether they are proud of what they do, not only in business but also in their personal lives.

An Innovator

Hospitality is a business built on the challenges of the now while constantly offering a renewed version of the “new and improved.” Asking students to “think like an innovator” is easy. Life is unfolding in front of them, but the innovator looks at the environment and sees opportunities in the future. Watts Wacker, the futurist business strategist, said it is not about what comes next - but “what comes *after* what comes next.” Hospitality, in a sense, is in the fashion business. Trying to stay ahead of our customers, we are in the relentless search for the next new dining trend from the next new chef, the next new lifestyle hotel, the hottest new destination resort, and the latest technological advances.

An Innkeeper

Concurrently, it is important for students to know that hospitality is one of the oldest of human activities. The tradition of welcoming travelers into the safety and protection of our care is ingrained in every culture. To “think like an innkeeper” is to stand on the foundation of thousands of years of universal practice. The innkeeper is someone with an historical perspective—someone with an innkeeper’s heart—someone who stands at the door and welcomes strangers with open arms. This touchstone asks a student to do what they have already discovered about themselves: that they seek to practice hospitality as a way of life.

A Leader

We also ask them “think like a leader.” The leader, in school or in business, says, “I’ve got an idea—let’s go there!” and people follow. The leader sets a vision, a clear path toward a different future, and people join them to move towards it. Students should know that leadership is exhibited by the entrepreneur who envisions a new restaurant concept or a new hotel format and assembles a team to bring it to market. But leadership is also shown by the person who comes up with a new room design and says “let’s do this!” or by someone who writes the agenda for a team meeting to define a future project. Thinking like a leader simply means having the courage to step up when others might not.

A Servant

Hospitality is service. The management theorist Robert Greenleaf wrote about the person who is a servant-leader, offering the business community a different kind of role model, one that is especially

relevant to this industry. So, in the last of “The Six Touchstones,” we ask students to apply this model and to “think like a servant.” The servant-leader is one who serves those in their care so that they may then lead and serve others. This is a natural cycle for our hospitality work: serve, lead, serve, lead, and serve again. Leaders, by definition, have followers. Servant-leaders, by definition, serve those followers by asking themselves, “What can I do to make their jobs, their work, easier and more meaningful today?”

Balance

These, then, are the dimensions of “The Six Touchstones:” Owner/Customer; Innovator/Innkeeper; and Leader/ Servant. In the graphic of the model, there is a line dividing the two sides into groups of three. One side, the Owner/Innovator/Leader perspectives ask the students to look outwards, away from themselves and towards the environment. The other side, Customer/Innkeeper/Servant, suggests that they look inwards, towards self-reflection. Combined and balanced, we feel these “Six Touchstones” provide students with a sound set of complementary perspectives to use as they become future hospitality managers.



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