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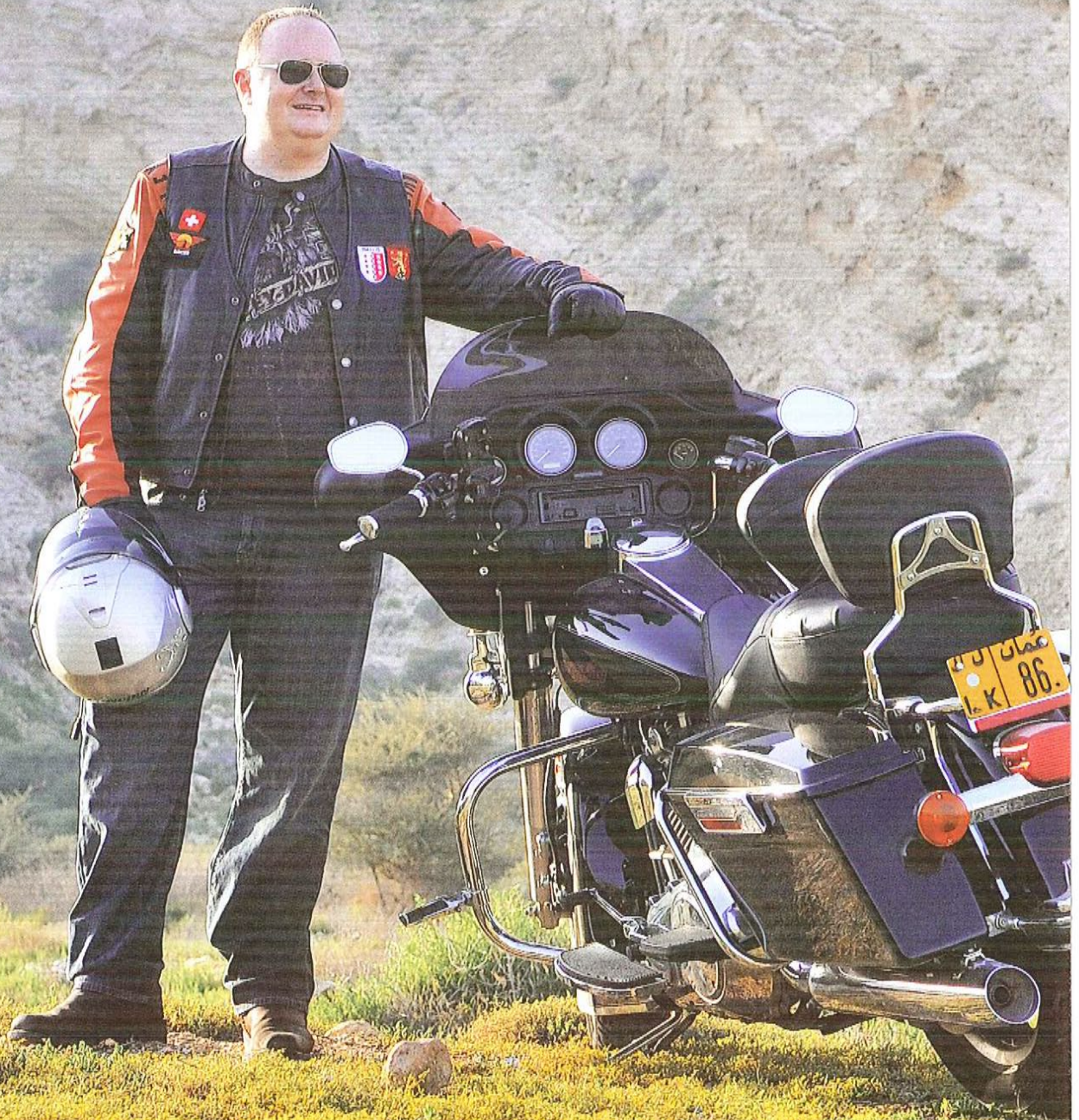
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# IT RUNS IN THE FAMILY

Christoph Franzen, general manager of Grand Hyatt Muscat, says leading by example is very important at the senior management level. By Letha Jose

If you see a group of Harley Davidsons zooming past, chances are Christoph Franzen, the general manager of Grand Hyatt Muscat is among them. A third generation veteran in the hospitality industry – his family owns a hotel at a ski resort in the Swiss Alps – Franzen is as passionate about biking as he is about his job. He says hospitality is one industry where being genuinely passionate about the job matters since it involves long hours and erratic weekends. That apart, most of the principles of good management practices apply as much to the sector as it does to the other industries.

According to Franzen, integrity and transparency are two of the most important management practices in any sector. Leading by example is also important, especially at the senior management level. "You can never gain the respect of your colleagues if you don't practice what you preach." But there are certain management issues specific to the hospitality sector, he points out. Handling privacy issues is one of the main tasks: while guests want to protect their privacy, hotels need to meet government specifications. "It's a delicate task. We have to know where the fine line is." Another such issue is gathering credit card details without compromising the privacy and security of the client.

This is Franzen's second stint at Grand Hyatt Muscat. He was here from 2001 to 2005 and was director of rooms when he moved to Hyatt Moscow in 2005. In six months he moved to Dubai – "I found Moscow too cold after the warmth of Muscat". In January 2009 he was back at Grand Hyatt Muscat as general manager.

To be successful in the hospitality industry requires a fair amount of operational management skills. He says leadership skills are not restricted to top management in this industry. Senior managers are required to be self-motivated and take their team along. They have to feed into the strategy of the organisation and communicate well with their people. "There are aspects of leadership in everybody's job. Senior managers are where they are because of their ability to lead, to motivate. That is what sets them apart and take them ahead."

Franzen says he is a hands-on leader who has no problem rolling up his sleeves to manage the front desk, check in customers or even take care of guests' luggage if necessary.

**Rachael**  
Spouse

Ask Rachael, Franzen's wife how he's at home, pat comes the reply, "He's not home much." But then she adds that he likes to relax. Franzen recently installed a projector so the family can watch movies on a big screen. Rachael says one of the most endearing qualities about him is that he never forgets a birthday or anniversary. "In fact, he often reminds me when someone in my family is having a birthday. I also love that he can fix almost any problem I have, big or small." Ask her about what she finds to be his most annoying habit, she says, "He



can't keep a secret at all! If he buys me a gift for my birthday he has to give it to me as soon as he's bought it. He can't hold onto it and keep it a secret until the actual date."

There's been one exception though. Recently when it was Rachael's birthday she asked him to book a short family holiday/break and to keep the destination a surprise. "I knew the 'keeping it a surprise' part would be really hard for him but surprisingly he actually did quite well and kept it a secret until 24 hours before we left. Only then he let on because our flight got cancelled and he had to completely re-book. We went to the Park Hyatt Resort in Goa and it was amazing."

The fact that he grew up at a resort run by his family in Zermatt, a tiny village in the Swiss Alps, could have helped in conditioning this attitude. Maybe, he admits but adds that it could also be because he has worked with mentors early in his career who have never had a problem lending a helping hand whenever it was necessary. Two people who he considers role models are still with Hyatt – Josef Kral, the general manager of Hyatt Warsaw and Ashwini Kumar, the general manager of Hyatt Abu Dhabi. Both are role models for entirely different reasons, says Franzen. Kral for his directness of approach and Kumar for knowing the industry inside out.

His day usually starts early in the morning reading the reports from the previous day. Apart from the usual managerial reports, he says the log books and duty manager reports are very important as they ensure that everyone is abreast of guest issues, VIP movements, incidents and accidents.

The senior management team has a briefing at 9am where the previous day is discussed and also look at what is happening throughout the day. After this briefing the rest of the day is usually filled with a few other meetings and appointments. "While I try to structure the day as much as possible, I know already that there will be deviations. There are guest issues to attend to, one or the other staff would like to see you to discuss a private or business issue, the owners may want to see you and seek some clarification

or Hyatt's divisional office may require some information. In addition to this, days also differ with the type of guests we have in-house. When we welcome heads of state or government delegation and the hotel is busy with preparations, there may be some other VIPs arriving. Or there could be return guests I would like to welcome and have a drink with to see how they are doing." Usually his day at work ends around 9pm, "when I go up and spend time with my family."

While most of the executives are living a successful life far from their childhood ambition, Franzen is living his dream. "I grew up in a resort. I used to watch my father moving around guests, talking to them and think 'wow, this is what I want to do'. It looked very glamorous. When you are a kid and watch all this you do not understand the hard work that goes behind a beautiful resort or hotel where everything is perfect." Finally, when he was 11 he told his father that he wanted to be a hotelier. His father asked whether he's sure and the next day Franzen found himself washing dishes. After a few days he was put in charge of taking care of the clay courts at the resort. "It was a lot of work. But that made me realise early on that this is a job which involves hard work."

After school he moved to another resort elsewhere in Switzerland away from the protective environment of the family business to learn the ropes. "I came up the traditional way – started off doing the dishes at the family



enterprise, then as a chef at another place, was a waiter for some years and then moved into front office and senior management."

Ask him what is the toughest task he has faced he says it was setting up a restaurant business in Germany in the 90s for a group that had no idea about this line of business. "Money was not an issue. They had loads of it as they were in the construction business. But the problem was that they were clueless as to the functioning of a food and beverage

## Girish Bhagat

Director of Rooms, Grand Hyatt Muscat

I have worked with Franzen actively since 2006. He is by far the most hands-on manager I have worked with. He strongly believes in working with his people and knows how to walk the talk. He is very approachable and will always listen to your opinions.

He has an amazing ability to deal with stress and I have personally never seen him lose his cool. He is a great people person and this is what is required when it comes to running an international hotel chain. Whenever I have an issue that I cannot deal with he will always take the time to guide me to find a solution. He is very well organised and has a structured approach to his daily work routine.

family except when he takes off on his Harley Davidson occasionally. "There are only a few activities you can indulge in taking your small ones along. So we tend to laze around the pool or go to the beach."

As for other interests outside work, Franzen is an action movie buff. He says he is of the opinion that movies have to be entertaining as that is their prime objective. "I do not like movies that makes you think a lot or sad. I love action movies the most, followed by comedies." However this penchant for entertainment does not percolate to his reading habits. Franzen is more into biographies than fiction or thrillers. "I just finished *In The Service of The Sultan* by Ian Gardiner. Books like that inspire you and you tend to learn from these."

Franzen says the qualities he looks for in people who work for him are integrity and dependability. But for any youngster who wants to enter this field he has a word of advice. "Join this field only if you are genuinely interested in it. This is a wonderful field, the job is very rewarding and comes with several perks but it also involves a lot of hard work and long working hours."

His family still runs the resort at Zermatt. But he has no plans of joining the business. "There are enough of my cousins there to take care of that. I do not want to get involved. But maybe at a later stage I can start something of my own." That definitely will be something that most people who know Franzen would be waiting for. ■



service sector. I set it up for them but moved on soon afterwards."

Franzen and family – wife Rachel, four-year-old daughter Ashley and one-year-old son Alexander – live in the hotel itself. He says sometimes people ask him whether he gets enough time with the family. "I feel truly blessed in this aspect. This is a 24/7 job but living on the upper floor of the hotel has ensured that I get much more time with my family than I ever had earlier. Of course

Rachel says I don't spend enough time with the three of them. Every morning my one-year-old walks me into my office holding my fingers. Once I'm in the office he'll turn around say bye and go back happily. But he gets very upset if he doesn't get to do that. Ashley, my daughter, runs into my office for a quick hug every day as she comes back from school before taking the elevator home. These are the little things I really cherish."

After work hours are usually spent with