The Future of Hospitality

Insights from industry leaders on innovation, AI, talent development, and the human touch that defines exceptional hospitality.

Meet Our Panel

Chef Mercer Mohr

Restaurateur & Chef leading multiple dining establishments with innovative cross-training programs.

Brett Labit

Art gallery operator revolutionizing the artist-gallery-customer relationship through technology.

Christopher McGahey

General Manager of Cliff Castle Casino, integrating robotics and AI while maintaining personal service.

Steve Segner

Boutique hotel owner at El Portal Sedona, championing personalized hospitality for 21 years.

Moderator: Dr. Mark Molinaro

Executive Director of the NAU School of Hotel & Restaurant Management, brings over three decades of global experience across fine dining, culinary education, and academic leadership. Recognized for shaping a new era of hospitality professionals through experiential learning and human-skills development.

What Is Hospitality?

Chef Mercer

"Making people feel comfortable and entertaining them. When you go from back to front of house, it's show time."

Brett

"Act like you're throwing a party and a new guest just walked in your front door."

Christopher

"Making people not only feel at home, but welcome into your home with unified teamwork."

Steve

"Hospitality goes back to ancient Greek *phila* — treating guests like family. It's built into our DNA."

Action Item: Write down "What is hospitality?" and discuss with your team to create a shared vision and cohesive sense of purpose.

Innovation in Action

Cross-Training Excellence

Chef Mercer implemented cross-training across all restaurants, taking six months per employee but dramatically improving accountability and flexibility.

Enhanced Artist Pages

Brett created superior artist pages with QR codes, solving gallery-artist tension while improving customer experience and directing traffic to their platform.

Robotics Integration

Christopher integrated robotics in their coffee shop, freeing staff for better customer interactions rather than replacing them.

Personalized Experience

Steve walks every guest to their room, spending 10-15 minutes on check-in with no paperwork, creating an immersive art and history experience.

> "Innovation doesn't require genius — just looking at problems differently. It's not something we need to worry about or wonder whether we have it or not. It's just a different mindset." - Dr. Mark Molinaro, NAU School of Hotel & Restaurant Management

AI Should Free Us to Be More Human

The panel's consensus: AI and technology must enhance human interaction, not replace it. Use innovation to handle heavy lifting so staff can focus on what matters most — genuine connections with guests.

Navigating AI & Technology

Free Staff for Floor Time

Use AI to keep managers on the floor leading by example, not buried in administrative tasks.

Improve Communication

Brett uses AI for conversations about team challenges: "AI is helping me be a better human."

Coach Your Tools

Christopher emphasizes AI needs proper "coaching" like any team member — it's a tool, not a replacement.

Maintain Balance

Use technology for efficiency but never lose the personal touch that defines hospitality.

Warning from Steve: "No front desk, no greeting, no handshake or smile... This isn't hospitality. It's capitalism at its coldest."

Dr. Molinaro shared two examples: Data Essentials for marketing analytics, Cut and Dry for restaurant ordering — tools that save time while preserving human connection.

Building Continuous Improvement

01
Weekly Goal Setting

Chef Mercer holds weekly meetings with managers to set goals for each restaurant and the company, reviewing accomplishments first.

02
Critical Examination

Brett examines different operational areas weekly, encouraging critical thinking across sales, inventory, and operations.

03
Lead by Example

Christopher demonstrates lifelong learning — studying a new language and algebra at 55 to inspire his team.

04
Empower Decisions

Steve empowers employees to make decisions without fear: "I will never ever question them."

05
Celebrate Success

Create "stones of remembrance" to document and celebrate achievements, maintaining momentum through challenges.

The Power of Empowerment

21
Years

Steve has maintained the same core employees since opening his hotel

3
Years

To complete three-year online hospitality bacherlor's degree with NAU HRM.

Goal: Boost employee retention and leadership promotion.

The Secret to Retention

Steve's approach: Employees have authority to give away rooms, write checks, or make any decision needed. When you question decisions repeatedly, you create bureaucracy. Instead, guide with: "I'm glad you did it. Here's another way to look at it."

> "They know more about my business than I do. I just have to make sure they feel free to do what they want."

Rethinking Talent Acquisition

1 Look Within First

Chef Mercer views his business as a "training facility," hiring people who can grow beyond current positions. Evaluate your existing team before looking externally.

2 Change Your Narrative

Brett stopped saying "it's hard to hire in Sedona" and focuses on understanding both company and individual goals. Language shapes reality.

3 Diversify Recruiting

Christopher recommends looking beyond traditional sources — shelters for women, recovery programs, and community organizations often yield loyal, motivated employees.

4 Hire Attitude Over Credentials

Steve hired people he liked with initiative rather than focusing on resumes: "I found people from the warehouse who knew operations and could think things through."

5 Build a Community Bench

Consider creating a shared talent pool where businesses with different seasonal needs could share staff — benefiting everyone while giving workers diverse experience.

The Hiring Toolbox

Second Interview in Action

Brett brings sales candidates into the gallery for hands-on interaction. "You don't see it in the interview, but you see it in the second interview."

Coach Good Athletes

Christopher emphasizes: "You can't coach a good athlete. If someone has a good attitude, you can teach them if you're willing to put in the time."

Remove Glass Ceilings

Show clear paths for advancement. Interns need outlets to try different roles. Let employees grow within your company without artificial limits.

Look for Initiative

Steve hired from the warehouse: "The ones who opened the door and said 'that damn thing' and brought problems to my attention — those are the ones I moved up."

Final Wisdom from the Panel

Chef Mercer Mohr

- Learn from mentors in your community
- Create clean, safe work environments
- Change what isn't working immediately
- Don't waste money on failed experiments

Brett Labit

- Be all in and go all out in the moment
- Slow is smooth, smooth is fast
- Follow the sequence: optimize, automate, then innovate
- Less done better is more

Christopher McGahey

- Innovation isn't just technology
- Borrowing and adapting ideas is valuable
- Own up to mistakes quickly
- Experience different properties to learn

Steve Segner

- Hospitality offers great careers without college degrees
- Work hard in your 20s, save money
- Find a mentor and commit to learning
- Everyone should work in a restaurant for six months

Dr. Mark Molinaro

- Innovation is a mindset; see problems with "different glasses," not genius.
- Use AI to enable more high-touch, human moments.
- Keep "stones of remembrance" to celebrate wins and sustain momentum.
- Build retention via employer-linked education with clear outcomes – reduce debt, faster career progression.

Your Action Plan

1 ## Define Hospitality

Write down and discuss "What is hospitality?" with your team to create a shared vision.

2 ## Explore Cross-Training

Evaluate cross-training possibilities to improve flexibility and accountability across your organization.

3 ## Evaluate AI Opportunities

Identify where AI could free staff for more meaningful guest interactions without losing the human touch.

4 ## Implement Goal-Setting

Start regular meetings for continuous improvement with clear, measurable objectives.

5 ## Build Community Resources

Consider creating a resource-sharing program for seasonal staffing needs with other local businesses.

6 ## Celebrate Wins

Document and celebrate successes to maintain momentum and inspire your team.

> "The time to start is today. Not tomorrow. Don't put this off for another week and then another week."