

Lessons from the Hospitality Industry: What Healthcare Can Learn about Innovating in Leadership and Patient Experience

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In this episode of SoundPractice, host Mike Sacopulos explores the intersection of healthcare and hospitality with Antonia Hock, an expert in customer and employee experience and former global head of the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center. They discuss how healthcare can learn from the hospitality industry's focus on culture, teamwork, and a genuine care mindset to enhance patient experiences. Hock emphasizes the importance of empowerment, daily reinforcement of positive culture, and attention to emotional needs. Through personal anecdotes and practical advice, Hock illustrates how healthcare professionals can adopt hospitality principles to improve patient care and outcomes.

KEY WORDS: Healthcare; hospitality; culture; teamwork; empowerment; patient experience; leadership.

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Mike Sacopulos: The words *hospital* and *hospitality* both come from the Latin word 'hospes,' which means host-guest relationship. For many, all that hospital and hospitality currently share is a common ideology. Sadly, patients often feel like raw input for the machinery of healthcare. My guest today has some interesting and informed thoughts on the topic of hospitality and healthcare. Medicine at its best is more than clinical skill. Prepare to hear from a hospitality expert with their eyes focused on healthcare next on SoundPractice.

Antonia Hock is an internationally recognized expert in customer and employee experience, leadership, and building brands. Antonia spent six years as the global head of the Ritz-Carlton Leadership Center. She has worked for Microsoft and Hewlett Packard. Antonia Hock, welcome to SoundPractice.

Antonia Hock: Thank you. I'm so excited to be here.

Sacopulos: Well, we're thrilled to have you. Let's start with a 30,000-foot question. What are the biggest lessons in leadership that healthcare can learn from the hospitality industry?

Hock: First of all, I love the connection between these two industries. They're not industries that I think, if we were to scroll back several decades, would naturally be connected, but I so love that at this point in the evolution particularly of healthcare and how leaders are thinking about it today, that they are connected. I think the lessons for me really focus in

a lot on culture. I'll start with that. I think hospitality inherently comes with a culture-first point of view, because you're really in a service industry. And service, at the end of the day, comes back to how you care about employees and how you care about the people you serve. It's really that culture-first point of view.

In the hospitality world, you can't deliver a great guest experience without a team.

Also, there's that acknowledgment in hospitality that great experience is driven by great culture. You can't care for guests, you can't deliver a really incredible memory or really genuine care, if you personally, as an employee or a practitioner, don't feel a part of that. It really starts with those elements. I love the fact that in healthcare now we're starting to think about, "how do we create a culture that is powerful?" Not just great outcomes or not just great at taking care of the patients physically; we're great at delivering an experience for employees and patients.

I also think, tying back to experience: teamwork. In the hospitality world, you can't deliver a great guest experience without a team. It is literally impossible. If you went to a hotel and you booked in for a weekend and you had one great

experience with one person at the pool and that was the sum total of your experience for the weekend, you wouldn't think that was a very good weekend. It takes everybody playing their position and taking the experience really thoughtfully to create a great one, end to end. It's that teamwork perspective.

Sacopulos: Let's drill down a little bit into this. When we think about teamwork in particular, which is certainly critical to guest experience, what can healthcare leaders learn about motivation and collaboration?

Hock: The first thing I think hospitality does really, really well is building on a shared vision. I love the focus, and I think it's back to the fact it's really a people business through and through. Guests are people, employees are people. It is really a people-driven industry. Leaders in hospitality, particularly in luxury hospitality, have figured out that that shared vision has to be co-created. It's not leaders saying, "We're all here today, we're all going to do it this way." It's a collective group of humans coming together and saying, "We have pride in the experience we deliver, and together we're going to craft that vision." I think that's incredibly powerful, and we're seeing that start to happen in the patient experience arena, and I love it. I think it plays back into if employees feel empowered, everybody wins. I also think motivation and collaboration come down to gratitude a lot. Most hospitality companies have a model that promotes gratitude, and they institutionalize it. Normally I'd say that's a bad word. Nobody wants to feel like they're part of something that is the Borg.

Sacopulos: No one wants to be institutionalized.

Hock: No, nobody does. But when it comes to gratitude, it's one of those things that having it be a structured part of your culture, a structured part of what you do, it just creates a really positive world because it's part of what you do day in and day out. It's not like, "Oh, somebody did something really extraordinary. I better thank them for that." It's just becomes a part of like, "Thank you, thank you." You can't say it enough and it sounds simple, but hospitality really gets that right.

People who work in hospitality have to be great at reading the room and understanding the emotional needs of the guest.

Then there's empathy and compassion. That's a huge part of hospitality. When people think about the hospitality industry, they think of vacations, because that's when most people will check into a hotel. But hospitality can be a place for a lot of things. People stay at hotels for a lot of reasons. Sometimes those are not for vacation. You're staying because you're caring for a loved one that is in a hospital situation. People who work in hospitality have to be great at reading the room and understanding the emotional needs of the guest. Empathy, compassion, emotional intelligence, active listening, those are all really powerful parts of being a great

hospitality company. I also think it's part of being a great healthcare leader that you bring a culture forward that has all of those.

Sacopulos: Without doubt. I think healthcare does well, at least in certain categories, the empathy, sympathy category, but maybe not so much in empowerment. And we could talk a little bit about the concept of empowerment as it relates to delivering great healthcare.

Hock: Empowerment for me, when I think about great experiences, it's a part of helping people feel valuable about their contribution. I think healthcare's legacy of being very hierarchical and having a lot of structure behind how it operates has posed a challenge to get to this empowerment model where everybody feels like they have an equal say or an important say in the patient experience and employee experience. I think that one of the reasons there's been such a study of hospitality is the concept of empowerment and how do you do that with an hourly workforce? How do you bring those concepts of trust and respect and vesting someone to use their creativity, to use their problem-solving skills? I think those are incredibly powerful human traits and the healthcare industry is, just in my view, just now really tapping into that across the spectrum.

Sacopulos: You mentioned hierarchical, which makes me think of the physician in healthcare. What can they do to improve a patient experience outside of the clinical realm?

Hock: I was actually going to just start there. We're very focused on outcomes, and those are, of course, critically important, but for so many of us, whether you're just going in for your annual exam or you're going through something much more serious, emotions are an innate part of the human experience. And so being able to understand the emotional side of a patient experience is critical, because the physician is always put on a pedestal, and thought about as "this is the person that may control my future, may control very important things about my life going forward, may give me advice about things that can control my destiny." That has to come along with emotional responsibility—how do you interact with another human being you may not know very well and support them emotionally while you're taking them through some outcomes? I think that's absolutely critical.

Also, partnering with the team. We talked about empowerment. I have had the absolute pleasure of working with some physicians that I watch because I can never turn off the service lens. I'm the one at the doctor's office who probably, I feel badly for my physician because it's like I'm there and I'm looking at every detail that's happening in the office, but I watch how they interact with their team members, I watch for that dynamic, that shared sort of collegial manner. It's so great when you see it because it elevates the energy in the room. I think no matter what you're talking about, that's so important to making patients feel great.

Sacopulos: Maybe you can give an example, because it seems to me that medicine is both an art and a science, and what you're speaking to is the art aspect of it, which—at least

in my experience—is not taught as frequently as the clinical or the science component. Can you give me some ideas on how that can be taught to or brought out in physicians?

Hock: Thank goodness there's a lot more happening in this realm right now. It's a very compelling and interesting part, and I do think there's a lot of training and also curricula that are being created around this. One of the things is that I can always tell when a physician has gone through some of those kinds of lessons or training, and that happened to me the other day. I watched a physician interact with their assistant just in an office setting. The way the conversation happened really rocked me back for a little bit because it was so thoughtfully done. We all know you have to be speedy, there's a lot of pressure on physicians regarding how much time are you spending per patient? This was done in an efficient manner, but it was done with so much respect and so much mutual care for me as the patient. It was just real. When I sat there and thought about it, I thought everybody should have that experience, employee or patient, watching those things happen.

Sacopolos: Why do you think the healthcare world finds the hospitality industry a source of inspiration and interest?

Hock: I think one of the things that I really love about the connection between these industries is the focus on genuine care. Nobody goes into healthcare by accident, particularly physicians. The commitment, the barrier to entry, the long-term sacrifice to get into healthcare is significant. You are called to it at some level. And hospitality, really great hospitality, focuses in on the same level. You're called to it. I would call it "a heart for service." In hospitality, again, we've all had the not great hospitality experience. But a great experience, you can feel somebody's heart for service, and I think that really intrigues healthcare because there's that same care and service-oriented mindset.

Sacopolos: Absolutely. Now, I feel so fortunate to have you on the podcast because you're clearly an international expert. I want to try to drill in and get some specific behaviors for our audience. Because, as you know, this is the podcast of the American Association for Physician Leadership, and we have lots of physicians out there, and I'm hoping you can give me your top three—the most important leadership behaviors that physicians can learn from leaders in the hospitality industry.

Hock: My top three here. I love to focus on personal accountability because you never know what organization as a physician you're representing or you're part of. When I think about personal behaviors, top of my list, we already touched on it briefly, is this concept of empowerment: helping your team to feel that their personal contributions matter no matter how big or small—that lens, and I believe it's a mindset. Empowering people can be a mindset. That's the first thing from a physician standpoint, is looking at your team through that lens of "how can I help you use your skills in an autonomous way?" Because that's really what empowerment means. It's like there's a level of respect and trust that comes

with it. When a physician vests you with trust and respect, I think you puff your chest out a little bit. I think you feel really proud to be a part of that. I think physicians can give that gift to the teams they work with if we were looking at a specific behavior.

I would also say embedding gratitude in a daily reinforcement kind of model has equal power in the sense that we're all running really fast. Maybe this extends even beyond physicians. We run very fast. Everyone does all day in their jobs. Making sure you are thanking people for their contributions, even if they're small, say thank you so much for taking care of that patient or getting that note into the file so quickly. Thinking up reasons to thank people, it becomes a virtuous cycle. When people feel thanked, they do better work. Those studies are really clear, and that's something we all have control over.

When you show up for other people having taken care of yourself and your personal wellness first, you become an example for others.

The last one I would say is taking care of your own personal wellness. That's a huge topic across so many industries right now. You need to lead by example. If you are not showing up to work in the morning with a healthy mindset, if you don't have your own personal ritual in the morning that helps you get ready for your day. Some people love to meditate, some people run, some people like to make sure they have their coffee. Other people maybe like to make sure they have their Red Bull. Whatever it is that gets you ready for your day and gets you into a mental space to be positive, you control that. When you show up for other people having taken care of yourself and your personal wellness first, you become an example for others. And that's another behavior everybody can demonstrate.

Sacopolos: That's very interesting. And I think unfortunately, many healthcare leaders don't do that.

Hock: A lot of people.

Sacopolos: They're busy and are focused elsewhere. And you bring up a great point. What allows some hospitality companies to deliver consistent guest experiences, and what can healthcare leaders implement from that model to enhance their patients' experiences?

Hock: I think one of the things that hospitality does particularly well is this concept of daily reinforcement for positive culture. And you know what? It's not just hospitality. We're talking about that here, but there are a lot of companies, great companies that implement this service model where you never get too far away from this concept. A day doesn't go by where you don't talk about the culture you're a part of or ask what are we going to do today collectively that matters? Some people would call it a purpose or a purposeful part of leading. That is such an important part of delivering consistency,

because if people are not in the right mindset every day to do something as a collective—after all, everybody has lives—their individual experiences start to come in. You're never putting everybody together and saying, "Today, remember today we're going to do it this way. This is what we stand for as a collective group." Hospitality does a great job of that.

I would also say understanding the role of emotion and memory in the experience. That's such a critical part of delivering a great experience in hospitality. You understand that when a guest leaves, they're going to leave with memories of that experience. Those memories will be positive, they will be negative, they could be traumatic, they could be joyful. Understanding that the memory is going to be a big part of the ongoing experience they have with you as a physician, as a practitioner, as a nurse, as whatever role you may be, they will remember that experience—so make sure it's a great one.

The last thing I'd mention is that concept of having a clear understanding of the journey. In hospitality, that would be the guest journey. We know you check in, we know what experience we want you to have as you go to your room. We know what experience we want you to have when you're walking around the facility. It's the same in healthcare, and it's all about the five senses. What you smell, what you touch, the language that's used, really dissecting the experience and the journey to all of the details. That is something that's very new for healthcare, but it's a really big part of great hospitality. No detail is accidental in a hospitality environment.

Sacopolos: That's interesting that you mentioned the five senses, because I instantly think of certain hotels that I've been in that when you walk through the door, you have a certain scent in the air, but I can't think of that same experience with any healthcare facility I've ever been in. Do you know, are there healthcare facilities that actually get to that level of thought?

Hock: I think we're starting to see that, depending on the type of facility—it is obviously not appropriate everywhere, but I do think we're starting to see this understanding. I mean, all we have to do as patients is just think about the waiting rooms we've been in. Over the last few decades, how much have those changed in terms of comfort, fabrics, what you're looking at? It can put you at ease. It can put you on edge. I was in a waiting room the other day. It was white, it was massively sterile, it had hardback chairs that were all spaced four feet apart, and I was instantly on edge. Then you go to another facility and you've got couches and it's warm colors, and there's coloring books for kids, and there's lovely music playing. And now I'm going into that appointment feeling very different about my experience. I love the fact that we're starting to see all five senses play into the healthcare arena.

Sacopolos: That's a great point. I can remember my partner, Greg Carter, telling me once that he went into a waiting room and all the reading material was six or seven years out

of date, and he knew at that very moment that they didn't care about him. I've always thought about that.

Hock: It's true, though. Those are the kinds of things. It's that attention to detail, it's part of the reason I think hospitality and healthcare, the coming together is so important.

Sacopolos: We could talk all day, but I'm coming to the end of our time together. But I really want to ask this question because you're a mountaineer and a rock climber, which is very impressive to me. Both of those are physically demanding and certainly mentally demanding as well, not unlike a certain current healthcare environment that we find ourselves in. What leadership lessons have you learned from your climbing that the physicians listening to this podcast could relate to?

Hock: Well, I think about this question actually a lot when I'm on the side of mountains, because for me, it's one collective life and everything comes together. When I think about those leadership lessons, I really have a top three for physicians. The first is that preparation is essential to being able to face the unexpected. Every single day, all of the physicians listening to this podcast probably face something unexpected. We often don't think about that preparation aspect, and that can be mental, it can be—we talked about earlier the sense of how do you get yourself mentally ready for the day? That's a huge part of rock climbing and mountaineering, that you have to be ready, you have to be mentally prepared for what you're going to face, because sometimes you have no idea whether there will be rockslides, could be anything. That's the first one.

I would also say your personal approach to wellness really matters, and I want to drive this one home because we know the last few years it's been a challenge in healthcare. People are running so fast and hard, they don't always stop and take care of themselves. But you can't scale the mountain if you don't take care of yourself. It doesn't mean you have to have something elaborate, but you do have to have something that really helps you personally feel good about your day. For me, I have to have at least one thing in the morning where I'm like, well, I take a deep breath and go, "That was for me today, and whatever else happens today, I have this one thing that really helped me feel good about me today in the morning." For me, that's coffee. I can't get outside and get up on a mountain without being caffeinated. That's really mission-critical.

The last one is controlling your mindset. It's a hard one, and we as adults don't think that often in a professional setting about our mindset, but there's so much in life that comes down to being able to control how you lead yourself and then how you lead others. When I'm on the side of a mountain and I'm facing some really tough challenges, what I've learned is the mind is the weakest muscle. It is the first muscle to give up even when the body can still go. Your mindset becomes so critical to what you're capable of day in and day out, and it's something we have to take care of. Those would be really my top three.

Sacopulos: What a fabulous answer. Antonia Hock, thank you so much for being on SoundPractice. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Hock: Oh, thank you. First of all, I want to say thank you to all the physicians listening because you touch all of our lives, and it's just an absolute pleasure to be here and be a part of the conversation. So, thank you.

Sacopulos: If someone in our audience would like to reach you and work with you, is there a way that they can get ahold of you?

Hock: Yes. You can use my name .com because that is my website, and you can always connect with me on LinkedIn, which I'm easy to find there as well.

Sacopulos: Beautiful. Thank you so much.

Hock: Thank you.

Sacopulos: My thanks to Antonia Hock. She reminds us healthcare should be focused upon the whole patient experience. Antonia's efforts expand the field of caring for patients in welcome ways. 🍷