



Leading Hospitality



18 LEADERSHIP SKILLS
FOR BECOMING A HOTEL
GENERAL MANAGER

MARYLOUISE FITZGIBBON, PH.D.

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Becoming a Hotel General Manager*

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Introduction

I've spent the majority of my career working in hotels. I started as a front desk agent and worked my way up to become a hotel general manager, leading a variety of small properties and large resorts with teams of every size, and I was responsible for everything from daily service to the overall financial results of the business. During those years, I worked in hotel finance, hotel HR, and hotel process improvement as a director of Six Sigma. From there, I moved into regional hotel operations, and I've held other leadership roles since. That journey, from the front desk to the general manager's office, is the one this book follows.

Along the way, I noticed something that stuck with me. Some leaders could walk into a team with poor results and a struggling culture and, over time, steadily turn it around. It never happened overnight. It came instead through a set of habits and instincts that seemed to compound, month after month, into something different. Other leaders, working just as hard and just as sincerely, could barely move the needle on their own team, no matter what they tried.

I was fortunate to have a broad view of that contrast. I've had a wide variety of hotel roles over the course of my career, in operations and in support departments, which meant I reported to and worked alongside a long line of leaders, each with a different style and way of getting results. Every time I heard a hotel leader ask a great question, handle a hard situation well, or say something that made a team suddenly pull together, I noticed, and I held onto the moments worth repeating, along with those I wanted to do differently. Those observations followed me throughout my career, and they kept adding up.

That contrast fascinated me enough that I eventually went looking for a more rigorous answer. My search for understanding what separated those two outcomes led me to a Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, where I focused on servant leadership and brought together what I'd observed in daily operations with an approach grounded in data. That work helped me put words to what I'd been sensing for years. The difference came down to a handful of skills that anyone can learn.

This book is the result of that search. Many excellent books show leaders how to build a great culture, and many others teach how to assemble a high-performing team. This book begins one step earlier, with the person doing the leading. It walks through the eighteen skills I believe matter most on the road to becoming a hotel general manager, and for leading well once you're there, from leading yourself to leading others to leading the business.

A note about the word *leader*. When I use it, I'm not pointing to a position or a business card. I mean the leader inside all of us. The leader in you. People follow great leaders because they respect them, not because they have to. Leadership is earned, one interaction at a time, and you can begin earning it on your first day, in your first job, with no one reporting to you.

The belief behind everything here is simple. Great leadership at every level is what makes great hospitality possible. A beautiful property, a perfect menu, and a flawless event plan all depend on people, and people are shaped by how they are led. A hotel is only as good as the way it's led, and the general manager sets the tone for all of it.

The book follows the order I believe leadership is built in. **Leading Yourself** comes first, because you can't improve anything around you until you have credibility with yourself. **Leading Others** comes next, because a team follows a leader they trust. **Leading the Business** comes last. It's the general manager's seat, where a leader's choices reach everyone. Each part has six chapters.

Every chapter works the same way. It opens with a story from my own career. Then comes a short explanation of the skill and why it

matters. Next you meet two people, one who lacks the skill and one who has it. I've purposely set many of them outside hotels, in restaurants, clubs, event venues, attractions, and travel, because these skills look the same across every corner of hospitality, and sometimes the lesson is clearer when it isn't happening in your own lobby. These people are invented, shaped by situations I've seen over the years, and none is a portrait of a real person. Then comes the blind spot, the mistake that well-intentioned leaders make most often. Each chapter closes with a few ways to build the skill and three prompts to carry with you: Reflect, Apply, and Notice. Read the book in order, or start with the chapter you need most this week.

You don't need to master all eighteen at once. A mantra I've leaned on for years is *Just Do the Next Thing*. Try one practice from this book, then the next, and then the next. Slow and steady wins here, one skill at a time.

Best of luck to you.

Marylouise Fitzgibbon, Ph.D.

PART ONE

Leading Yourself

Chapters 1–6

Every leader starts out as someone who isn't yet leading anyone. That's why this part comes first, and why it applies on day one of a guest-facing or back-of-the-house role, long before there's a title. The six skills we'll focus on in this first section are *self-awareness*, *relationships*, *optimism*, *communication*, *organization*, and *wellness*. None of them depends on authority, and all of them decide whether people will want to follow you once you have it. If you're early in your career, this is where to spend your time. If you're further along, read it as a reset on the everyday habits that still shape how others experience you.

CHAPTER 1

Self-Awareness

I had been a front desk manager for four months, and I thought I understood the job. I built the schedules. I watched labor hours against the forecast. I covered call-offs, usually by rewriting the schedule at six in the morning. I reviewed the shift logs, audited the cash drawers, built the VIP amenity lists, and trained the new hires. I handled the guest who wanted a different room, the guest who wanted a refund, and the guest who wanted whoever was in charge. Every day I briefed the team on arrivals and departures, then sat through meetings with other departments. I signed off on payroll corrections and settled the argument over who got the weekend off. By any list I could write, I was doing the job.

Then the engagement survey results came back. Our front desk was near the bottom of the entire hotel, and my assistant managers' scores were just as low.

The comments didn't have anything to do with improving the day-to-day management of the front office. They said I told people what to do and didn't ask questions. They said suggestions went nowhere and that I fixed problems before anyone finished explaining them. One comment hurt more than the rest: "She is more interested in sharing her thoughts than in listening to ours." I read it standing at my desk with my face burning.

My boss didn't tell me what was wrong. She went through the comments with me, one at a time, and asked, "What do you notice?" It

took me most of an hour to answer honestly.

What I finally saw was that I had been doing everything my way. I assumed the skills that got me promoted, knowing every answer and fixing every problem fast, were the same skills I needed to lead a team. I couldn't have been more wrong. My team didn't need me to have all the answers. They needed me to ask for theirs, and to help them grow.

SELF-AWARENESS

A self-aware person can say what they value, what they do well, where they struggle, and what sets them off. They also know roughly how they come across, because they've checked, and they work to close the distance between who they are and who people see. Leaders like this make cleaner decisions, recover faster from mistakes, and are easier to trust. Nothing else in this book works well without self-awareness, which is why the book starts here.

Self-awareness has two halves. The first is internal: how clearly you see your own values, strengths, reactions, and habits. The second is external: how accurately you understand the way other people see you. The two don't come as a set. A person can be deeply reflective and still misread how they land in a room, or read a room well and stay a stranger to their own patterns. And most of us give ourselves more credit than we've earned. In one large research program, most people believed they were self-aware, while only 10 to 15 percent met the bar.¹

I saw this gap in myself at the front desk, the year of the engagement survey. The signs were there months before the results came back. My assistant managers had stopped bringing me problems, and I read their quiet as everything running smoothly.

Seeing yourself clearly is only the start. Naming a weakness isn't the same as working on it. A leader who says, "I'm terrible with conflict," and leaves it there has turned a blind spot into an excuse. The leaders who grow ask for feedback, choose one thing to change, and let the people around them see the effort.

Self-awareness is also the road to authenticity. The goal is to keep learning who you are at the core, then close the gap between that person and the one people see every day. Authentic people see situations as they are, accept themselves and others while still working to improve, use humor to lift a moment rather than cut someone down, and admit mistakes quickly.

The inauthentic version looks different. It shows up as needing approval to feel valued, judging other people's weaknesses, using humor as a jab, and getting defensive when someone offers feedback. People won't willingly follow someone they sense is putting on an act. Forget being perfect, or being who you think others expect. Find your own voice and let where you come from and what you value show when you speak.

Trust is built on integrity, the habit of doing what you said you would do, and your team will judge you by your follow-through. They notice it in hundreds of small moments, like whether you showed up when you said you would, told the truth when it was inconvenient, gave credit to the person who earned it, and admitted an error before someone had to point it out. Each small promise kept adds a little trust, and each one broken takes away more. You can't keep your word if you don't notice when you're about to break it, which is why self-awareness comes first.

Monday mornings, Paul opens the events meeting at his private club with the same line. "You all know conflict isn't my thing," he says, and the room laughs, because it's true and he's the first to say so. His wife says the same. He has made peace with it.

What the room doesn't say is that the terrace is double-booked for Saturday, a bridal shower and the member-guest dinner, and that Lena, his events coordinator, found the problem on Thursday. She thought about telling Paul. She also remembered the last problem she brought him, when he said "let's see how it shakes out" and nothing happened for nearly two weeks. So she texted the chef, moved the shower indoors, and told no one.

After a bad quarter, Danielle, the general manager of a mid-sized hotel, could have blamed the staffing shortage and the ownership group. Both were true. Instead she asked her three department heads a question she didn't want answered: what am I doing that makes your job harder?

The chief engineer waited a long moment. "The schedule changes," he said. "Thursday, for Friday. Every time." Danielle started to explain that the owners had moved a group arrival, and heard herself doing it. She stopped halfway through the sentence. "Okay," she said. "Say more." He did, for ten minutes, and some of it stung. The next week she moved her schedule changes to Tuesday and asked all three of them to call her on it when she slipped. Over the next month, they called her on it twice.

THE BLIND SPOT

Most people try to build self-awareness themselves: a personality assessment, the retelling of a story to a friend or family member while asking, "Am I wrong here?", or a leadership book that happened to land. But people who spend the most time reflecting on themselves are no more self-aware than those who rarely do, and are sometimes less.¹ Thinking about yourself mostly checks your thinking against your thinking, and a friend who hears only your version of the story will often take your side. The missing information is in other people's heads, and you have to go and get it. The same is true as your title grows. The more authority you hold, the fewer people will volunteer the truth, so you have to ask for it directly.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Know your values, then check them against your calendar.** Write down the three or four things you won't compromise on, then compare them with last month's decisions and calendar. Where they don't match, people sense it, even if they can't name it.
- **Learn your triggers.** Notice what sets you off: a certain tone, a surprise, being corrected in front of others. When you feel it, take one breath before you answer. You can't choose the feeling, but you can choose the next thirty seconds. That pause is the heart of emotional intelligence.
- **Keep your word in small things.** Notice every time you say "I'll get back to you," "I'll look into it," or "by Friday." Write those promises down and close each one, or tell the person early that you can't.
- **Ask for the outside view, including your strengths.** Pick one or two people who want you to succeed enough to risk an awkward conversation, and ask them this month: what do I do best, and what might I not see? When they answer, say thank you and don't explain. A few weeks later, tell them what you're working on because of what they said.
- **End the day with one question.** Where did I fall short of who I want to be today? Ask *what* happened, not *why* you're like this. "What was I reacting to?" leads somewhere. "Why am I like this?" usually doesn't. Be kind about the answer.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Recall feedback you've heard more than once, from different people, in different words. What did you do with it? Did something change, or did you find a good reason it didn't apply to you? Write down which.

Apply. This week, ask one person you trust: “What’s something about how I come across that I might not see?” Then listen to the whole answer before you say anything.

Notice. Watch for the half-second when feedback lands and you reach for an explanation. That reach marks the edge of a blind spot.

CHAPTER 2

Relationships

I started my career as a front desk agent at a large convention hotel. On any given shift, ten to fifteen of us stood behind the counter checking guests in and out, assigning rooms, making keys, running credit cards, answering the phones, arranging late checkouts, printing folios, giving directions to the restaurants, and explaining the charges on a bill. A line could form faster than we could clear it.

Like most hotel front desks, ours was the one place a guest would come with any problem or challenge. A bag that never made it up to the room. A broken air conditioner. A noisy neighbor. A banquet next door that ran past midnight. Guests never asked which department was responsible. They came to the desk, and my job was to solve it.

The challenge was that I had no formal power at all. As hotel hierarchies go, I was at the bottom of the ladder. I didn't have the authority to move a room to the front of housekeeping's line. I didn't have the authority to move a repair to the top of engineering's list. I didn't have the authority to ask the banquet team to turn the music down. I would have to rely on relationships with the people who did.

One evening, a family arrived after a long flight with a toddler asleep on his father's shoulder. They had asked for a crib, and the request had never made it from reservations to housekeeping. But I knew the P.M. housekeeping supervisor by name, because I had stopped by her office most afternoons to ask how her day looked. I called her, explained, and asked, "Is there any way?" By the time the family put the key in the door,

the crib had been rushed to the room, made up and waiting.

Often it didn't matter which department was right or wrong, or who had dropped the ball. That job was where I first saw that relationships could get done what authority never could, and I've been relearning it ever since.

RELATIONSHIPS

Behind every business there are people, and people work through relationships. Leadership itself is a series of relationships, sometimes one-to-one and sometimes one-to-many, with employees, peers, partners, customers, and vendors. Whether the number is one or a thousand, each relationship rests on the same two things, trust and communication. Building them has little to do with socializing or handing out business cards. It means taking an interest in people, getting to know them, and caring how things go for them, and that requires time and effort.

Most work that matters also crosses a boundary, whether it's another team's sign-off, a deadline in a different building, or a customer's problem that sits half in one department and half in the next. Every organization runs two systems at once, the formal one on the org chart and the informal one made of who trusts whom. Information and goodwill move much faster through the second. The people who get things done are rarely the ones with the most authority. They're the ones who already know someone on the other side.

Although I learned that lesson on the power of relationships at the front desk years ago, I've still caught myself slipping occasionally. As my titles grew, there were times I reached for authority when I should have reached for a relationship. I would send a request down the line, or copy someone's boss, or point to a deadline, when a five-minute conversation with the right person would have done more.

Relationships also reach beyond your own building. As your role grows, some of the people who help you most will be outside your department or your hotel: a mentor a level or two above you, peers at other properties, people in other industries. These relationships rarely

feel urgent, so busy leaders let them slide. They're also the ones that bring new ideas, help you see the bigger picture, and open doors when you're ready for the next role.

Relationships won't solve every problem, but they build the trust that makes solving them easier. They should rest on honesty and respect. The strongest ones start with understanding what the other person cares about, including their pressures, their goals, and what makes their day harder. People can tell quickly when a relationship is only about what someone can get. Neglect has a cost, too. Burn enough bridges and you can't be effective, no matter how right you are.

Jessica directs events at a beach resort, and her paperwork is flawless. Every banquet order goes in on time. Every request to housekeeping, engineering, and the kitchen is complete, polite, and routed through the right system. She has met the director of housekeeping twice, both times at the quarterly operations meeting.

At two o'clock on a Friday, the mother of a bride calls. Rain is coming, and she wants the welcome reception moved from the lawn into the lobby bar at six. Jessica files the requests and waits. The engineering ticket for extra power sits in the queue behind a broken ice machine. The kitchen wants a revised order in writing. Housekeeping needs to turn two rooms early for the bridal party and has no one to spare. By five-thirty, the reception is moving, but slowly, and the bride's mother has noticed. Jessica refreshes the engineering queue and waits.

Marcus is a customer service supervisor at a regional airport, and two or three days a week he eats lunch in the ramp break room instead of the terminal office. He knows the ramp lead's daughter plays travel softball, and that maintenance hates it when the gate calls them for things that aren't maintenance.

One evening, ten minutes before pushback, a gate agent tells him a passenger's power wheelchair is still sitting at the bottom of the jet bridge. Marcus doesn't file anything. He calls Mike, the ramp lead, on his cell. "I know you're slammed," he says. "I've got a chair that has to make this flight." Mike sends two people, and the chair makes the flight.

THE BLIND SPOT

Office politics has a bad name, so capable people keep their distance from it. They see relationship-building as schmoozing, a little beneath them, and they would rather let their work speak for itself, or send every request through the proper channel and wait. That instinct is admirable, and it costs them. Good work speaks inside your own department. It rarely travels across the building. The people on the other side have their own pressures and their own queue, and when everyone's request is reasonable, they help the ones they know first. Some people swing the other way and collect contacts. A relationship built only to get something is easy to spot, and people stop returning those calls.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Map who you depend on.** List the two or three teams or partners your work relies on most, including the people who sit between departments, like schedulers and coordinators. Those are the relationships worth building now.
- **Show up with nothing to ask.** Have lunch where they have lunch. Ask what's hard about their week, and remember the answer.
- **Give first.** Find a small way to make another team's job easier before you ever need a favor. People remember who showed up only when they wanted something. Help often, but not at the expense of your own work.

- **Repair early.** When a relationship goes sideways, reach out first and own your part. A burned bridge costs far more than an awkward conversation.
- **Build one relationship outside your building.** Find a mentor a level or two above you, or a peer at another property, and stay in touch even when you don't need anything.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Think of the last few times something urgent had to move across a department line. When it worked, was it because of a relationship, or because the timing happened to break your way? Count how many of your saves depended on luck.

Apply. Pick one team outside your own that your work depends on. Before the week is out, have a conversation with someone there that includes no request at all.

Notice. Listen for the teams you describe as “difficult.” Ask yourself whether you’ve ever invested anything in knowing the people on them.

CHAPTER 3

Optimism

I moved to a new city and state to take a job as director of operations at a hotel in the Perimeter area of Atlanta, one focused on corporate business travelers. I had barely unpacked when the company that managed the hotel announced it was opening a new property elsewhere in the city. Most of the executive team would be moving there to help open it. They asked me to stay behind as the last member of our executive team and to keep the employees motivated, because the hotel was about to be sold.

I wasn't feeling optimistic about any of it. I was new, the leaders I had just met were leaving, and a sale was coming. We had more questions than answers. Would the new owner keep the team? What would change, and what would stay the same? Employees stopped me every day with those same questions, and I didn't know exactly what to tell them.

Then something changed for me. I realized these employees were counting on me for more than the latest news. They were counting on me to give them hope that everything would work out in the end. I didn't paint an unrealistic picture of the future, and I never pretended to have all the answers. I told them what I knew, when we would learn more, and what I was hearing that made me optimistic.

And it did work out. The new owners came in and upgraded the hotel, improved the employee break rooms, and gave everyone fresh uniforms. They also began promoting from within, so the people who had stayed through the uncertainty had new places to grow.

OPTIMISM

Optimism isn't a sunny personality. It's a habit of thought, and it shows up most in how you explain what goes wrong. Optimistic people see a setback as temporary, limited to one situation, and within their power to manage, rather than proof of who they are. That view makes them more resilient. It's what gets a person back to work after a brutal review and into the next interview after a rejection, and it turns failure into a normal part of the job and a chance to learn.

Optimism also looks ahead, and here there's a catch. Simply picturing a happy future, the new title, the applause, can drain the effort needed to get there. The daydream delivers a small taste of the reward ahead of time, and the urge to go earn the real thing fades. What works is a more demanding version: a clear, hopeful picture of what you want, paired with an honest look at what stands in the way. People who hold both at once put in more effort, plan better, and follow through more often than those who only dream.²

Optimism is something people look for in a leader. We want to follow someone who offers hope for the future and brings some joy to the work. This kind of optimism starts with an honest read of the facts and builds a better future from there. The leaders who handle hard times best hold two things at once: they face the hardest facts of their situation, and they never lose faith that they'll come through. Moods spread, too. A team reads its leader's outlook in a sigh, a joke, or a shrug, and soon carries it as its own. And if optimism doesn't come naturally to you, it can be learned.

Kevin is the director of food and beverage at a resort, and the owners have decided to replace the paper tickets in all three restaurants with a new kitchen display system next month. Kevin thinks it's a mistake, and he doesn't hide it. In the managers' meeting, he sighs, "Well, it's happening whether we like it or not." At the pass, he jokes that the cooks should enjoy their paper tickets while they last. When a cook asks how the new screens will work, he shrugs. "Beats me. Ask the owners."

Kevin sees himself as just being honest. His team sees something else. By the first weekend, two cooks have asked to come off the schedule, the servers are telling regulars to expect slow tickets, and nobody has tried the practice screens. When the kitchen falls behind on the first rush, Kevin shakes his head. "Told you," he says, and the whole line nods.

Alyssa is one of five planners on a 2,000-person association conference. Three weeks before opening day, the host hotel calls: a water main has broken, the grand ballroom is flooded, and it won't be ready in time. The general session, the awards dinner, and the exhibit hall all lived in that room.

The team meets that afternoon. The project lead is stuck on calls with the client, and everyone else is staring at the table. Alyssa had spent her whole drive in thinking the conference was finished. Somewhere around the parking garage, she changed her mind. "This is bad," she says. "It's going to be a hard three weeks. But we didn't lose the conference. We lost a room." She stands up and writes three lines on the whiteboard: general session, awards dinner, exhibitors. "The exhibitors need to hear from us before the rumors reach them. I'll take that one. Who wants the other two?" When the project lead finally walks in an hour later, the whiteboard is full.

THE BLIND SPOT

Positive thinking gets sold as the whole job. Picture the goal, repeat the affirmation, believe it hard enough. It feels productive, and it feels good, which is part of the problem. The mind can treat a vivid fantasy as a partial reward. The most effective optimists don't avoid thinking about what could go wrong. They believe they'll succeed because they've already thought it through. Forced cheerfulness fails from the other direction. People can tell when someone is pretending everything is fine, and it costs trust. And when a setback comes, it's tempting to read it as proof the whole thing won't work. That's usually the moment optimism matters most. The goal is hope that has already looked at the hard parts.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Pair hope with a plan.** For one goal, write down what you want, the best outcome you can imagine, the main obstacle *inside you* that stands in the way, and your plan for getting past it. Five minutes turns hope into direction.²
- **Remember who's watching.** Your team takes its cue from you, especially during a change. A sigh in a meeting or a joke at the pass tells people how to feel before you've said a word. Before you talk about something new, decide what you want them to walk away believing.
- **Tell the truth, then point to the path.** Share what you know, what you don't, and when you'll learn more. Then name one thing that gives you reason for hope.
- **Ask three questions after a setback.** Is this permanent, or temporary? Is it everywhere, or just this one situation? Is it out of my hands, or is some of it mine to manage? "The first week was rough" leaves room to act. "This will never work here" doesn't.

- **Start it yourself.** When a project hits a wall, you don't need a title to name the problem honestly, shrink it to its true size, and offer to own one piece.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Pick a goal you've been talking about for a long time without much movement. How much of your energy has gone into picturing the outcome, and how much into removing what's in the way? If the balance is off, decide whether you're waiting on timing or enjoying a goal that's exciting only as long as it stays in the future.

Apply. This week, spend five minutes writing out that goal: what you want, the best outcome, the obstacle inside you, and your plan. Then take one small step on the plan before the weekend.

Notice. Right after a setback, check your self-talk. If "that didn't go well" turns into "I'm just not...", you've caught an event becoming a verdict.

CHAPTER 4

Communication

My first general manager role was at a different Atlanta hotel, one that drew mostly leisure travelers. For a while, it was the only hotel our brand had in the city. Then the brand team shared some news. We had recently signed deals to open three more in Atlanta, each serving a different key market. The hotels were still in development, and none of the management teams had been hired yet. Someone needed to speak on behalf of the operating teams that would eventually run them. Along with my day job of running my own hotel, I was asked to attend design meetings, model room reviews, and sessions with ownership as “the voice of the operator.”

I walked into the first meeting ready to explain everything an operator would want to say. I quickly learned that was too much. I left having said everything, and nobody could have told you afterward what my point had been. The room was full of architects, designers, developers, and owners’ reps, and each of them had their own priorities and their own list. The operator’s view was one voice among many that had to be weighed in every decision. If I wanted mine to count, I had to be far more concise than I was used to.

So I changed how I spoke. I picked the one or two points that mattered most to the guests and the employees, said them in plain language, and gave the reason in a sentence. The things I spoke up on were design details that looked good on paper but wouldn’t make for a great guest experience. In one model room review, the designers were proud of a

sleek shower with no visible controls. It looked beautiful, but a guest would have no idea how to turn on the water. I kept my comment to one sentence: a guest who can't work the shower in the morning won't remember how beautiful it was. Another time, it was a bathroom with a clear glass door. It looked modern, and it would never work for families traveling together.

I also had to reinforce the most important point in every one of those meetings. Everything we do is focused on creating a great guest experience. I repeated it over and over, in a variety of ways. Sometimes I asked how a guest would feel arriving at midnight after a long flight. Sometimes I asked whether a family of four would know what to do. The wording changed from meeting to meeting, and the message stayed the same.

COMMUNICATION

Great communicators decide which messages matter most, then find the clearest, most direct way to get them to the people who need them. Every handoff in between is a chance for the message to change, the way a story shifts in the old telephone game, so the closer you can get to the people who need to know, the better. Speed counts, too. People who hear news early and firsthand feel included. People who hear it last and secondhand feel like outsiders, and that gap grows when a team works across shifts, locations, or screens.

The most important messages are the simplest ones, like where we're going, what matters most, and how we'll get there. Say them clearly, without clutter or buzzwords, and repeat them far more often than feels necessary. Make them concrete, too. A vivid example sticks much longer than a principle, which is why "a guest arriving at midnight after a long flight" did more in those design meetings than "the guest experience" ever could.

A clear message still has to land with the person in front of you, and strong communicators have range. The same news may need to reach a longtime colleague, someone in their first week, a person who's already

upset, and a boss who only wants the headline. The facts stay the same. The pace, vocabulary, detail, and warmth change to fit the listener. Delivery is part of the message, and a true sentence said the wrong way to the wrong person often doesn't arrive at all.

Watch for your own shorthand. Once you know something well, it's hard to remember what it was like not to know it, and the terms that feel obvious to you can leave a listener lost. And a message isn't finished when you stop talking. It's finished when the other person understands it, so watch their face, and ask.

Renee runs guest operations at an outdoor concert amphitheater. On the radio, she's short, fast, and precise, which is exactly what a sold-out night needs. Her ushers and parking crew like working for her, and the production office says she writes the cleanest incident reports in the building.

One August night, lightning appears on the radar twenty minutes before the headliner, and the show goes on hold with eight thousand people on the lawn, many of whom have been there since the gates opened at five. Renee takes the stage microphone. "Show's on hold. Weather. No estimate." Then she hands it back. Every word is true. She delivered it to a crowd of hot, restless fans the way she would call it in to the production office, and they hear it as a door slammed in their faces. Guest services fields dozens of complaints in the next hour, and one fan's video of the moment is online before the band ever takes the stage. "I told them exactly what was happening," Renee says.

Andre manages onboard service for a scenic railroad that runs day trips through the mountains. Halfway through a fall foliage excursion, word comes over the radio that a rockslide has closed the track ahead. The train will stop at the next station, and buses will carry everyone the last forty miles. Within twenty minutes, Andre has told the news four different ways.

With the conductors, it's thirty seconds of shorthand. With the dining car staff, several of whom are in their first season, he slows down and walks them through the three questions every passenger will ask: Is everyone safe? Do I get my money back? How do we get home? In the dome car, a couple on their first train trip is clearly nervous. Andre starts in on "the track warrant," sees two blank faces, and stops. "Sorry," he says. "Everyone is safe. Part of a hillside came down onto the tracks miles ahead of us, so we'll finish the trip by bus. Here's how your refund works." And when a retired railroad engineer wants the real reason, he gets the mile marker and all.

THE BLIND SPOT

"I say it how it is" sounds like integrity, and many people treat speaking the same way to everyone as a mark of honesty. Consistency belongs in your message and your values. Your delivery can flex without making you any less truthful. People also get it wrong in the other direction, adjusting on assumptions about someone's age, title, or background instead of what you see, which quickly becomes condescending. Either way, the focus is on what you said rather than on what the other person heard. Range comes from reading the person in front of you.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Say it in one sentence first.** Before any important message, write the one sentence you want people to remember, and one example that

makes it real. If you can't, you're not ready to send it.

- **Choose the right channel.** Hard news and anything emotional belong in person or at least on a call. Details and records belong in writing. Never let important news reach people as a rumor.
- **Repeat what matters.** Say your priorities again and again, in different settings. About the time you're tired of saying it, people are starting to remember it.
- **Read before you speak.** Notice the other person's pace, energy, and mood. If you're unsure how much they want, ask: "Short version or the whole thing?"
- **Fix the message, flex the delivery.** Decide what's true and what has to happen, and don't change it for anyone. Then adjust the words, detail, and tone, including a little of the other team's shorthand.
- **Check that it landed.** Instead of "Any questions?", ask "What will you do first?" or "What part of this raises questions for your team?" The answer tells you what they heard.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Over the past year, which people or groups have responded well to how you communicate, and which have misread you, pushed back, or tuned out? With the second group, have you ever changed your approach, or did you decide that's just how they are? Be honest about whether your style with them is a choice or a habit.

Apply. Before one conversation this week with someone whose style is different from yours, choose one thing to adjust, such as your pace, your level of detail, or how you open. See how they respond.

Notice. After your next important message, listen to what people repeat back to you. If it isn't the one sentence you meant, the message didn't land.

Organization

One visual has worked for me for years. It comes from an old story about a professor who set three things on his desk: a large, empty glass jar, a pile of big rocks, and a bag of sand. He poured the sand into the jar first, then tried to add the rocks. Only a few would fit. Then he emptied the jar and started over, big rocks first, and poured the sand in around them. This time everything fit. I think of the big rocks as my biggest priorities, the things that matter most to me. The sand is everything else: the emails, small requests, and fires that feel urgent and are forgotten by the end of the week. If I fill my jar with the sand first, there's no room left for the rocks. So I keep an ongoing list of my big rocks, at work and at home, and I look at it every morning so the sand can't take over. It keeps me focused, lowers my stress, and makes me more productive in both places.

Nothing tested the jar concept like pre-opening a new hotel. I was the general manager of a new hotel in the Buckhead area of Atlanta, and the building was still under construction. The list of priorities seemed endless. We had to hire and train every employee. We had to build a strategic plan and a budget. We had to choose and order everything a hotel needs, from furniture and linens to china and uniforms. I was walking the building with the contractors as it went up, working through inspections and licensing, and signing contracts with vendors. And we had to create buzz for a hotel that didn't exist yet, including a rooftop bar that was expected to draw a celebrity crowd.

Everything felt urgent. If we treated it all the same, the sand would fill the jar before the rocks ever went in. So I sat down with my team and we sorted it together. We asked what had to be right on opening day and what could be fixed later. The answer was a short list of big rocks: hiring the right people, a clear plan for how we would run the hotel, making sure the city knew we were coming, and getting pre-bookings across group and convention business, corporate, transient, and catering events. We wrote them down and talked about them at every meeting, so we wouldn't lose sight of what mattered most. When a day filled up with paint samples and vendor calls, that list told us which rock we were working on.

ORGANIZATION

Organized people know what matters most this week, and they protect time for it before the day fills up with everything else. They have one trusted place where commitments live, so they aren't carrying a hundred loose ends around in their heads. When something unexpected lands, and it always does, they can see what has to move to make room, and they choose what gives. They also turn big, vague projects into a clear next step. "Summer clinic program" can sit on a list for months. "Email the head pro three possible start dates" gets done this afternoon.

That clarity pays off twice. First in output, because the important work gets done instead of being pushed to next week again. Then in energy. A mind that isn't busy trying to remember everything has room to think, notice, and enjoy the people around it. Anyone can build these habits, and the right system is simply the one you'll still be using six months from now.

Being organized also gives you time back. It's easy to underestimate how much time chaos costs, from the search for the email to the double-booking to the task done twice. Organize your inbox, your texts, and your calendar, and invest the energy to find a setup that works for you. It pays you back many times over in less stress and more time for the people and things you enjoy most.

Owen is an assistant golf professional at a busy private club, and members love him. Text him at nine at night about a lesson and he'll answer by 9:02. His to-do list lives on sticky notes around the pro shop monitor, in three different texting apps, and in his head.

In March, the head professional asked him to build a summer junior clinic program. It's now July. Owen has answered thousands of messages since then, rescheduled a dozen lessons, and run every Saturday shotgun start. The clinic program is a folder on his desktop with one document in it. Last week he double-booked a member's lesson with a junior tournament warm-up, and spent most of an afternoon untangling it.

Priya sells private dining and catering for a restaurant group with three locations. Every Sunday evening, she spends twenty minutes with a notebook and her calendar. She writes down her three big rocks for the week, usually one revenue goal, one relationship, and one project, and blocks time for each before anything else goes on the calendar. Everything else she hears goes into a single list on her phone, which she empties into the plan twice a day.

On a Wednesday in October, the chef at her busiest location quits. Three tastings and a rehearsal dinner suddenly need a new plan. Priya opens her notebook and crosses off one rock: the new corporate brochure can wait two weeks. Then she calls her boss before he finds out on his own. "I'm pushing the brochure to the twentieth so I can cover the chef gap," she says. "Tell me if that's the wrong trade."

THE BLIND SPOT

Being busy and responsive feels like being organized. Every message answered, every fire put out, a full calendar, a long day. But speed of response says nothing about whether the important work is moving. Many people who look organized are simply fast, and the work that has no deadline and no one chasing it is the work that never gets done. Hunting for the perfect app doesn't help either. The tool is far less important than the weekly habit of deciding what comes first. Urgent and important are also not the same thing. Most of what pings you is urgent but not important. Most of what builds your future is important but not urgent, which is exactly why it keeps waiting.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Name your big rocks.** Each week, write down the two or three outcomes that would make it a success. Keep the list short enough to remember.
- **Put the rocks on the calendar first.** Block time for the big rocks before meetings and messages fill the space.
- **Name the next step.** For every big project, write down the very next action, small enough to finish in one sitting.
- **Keep one list.** Pick a single home for every new commitment. Then spend twenty minutes each week on what got done, what's next, and what can go.
- **Protect your focus time.** Silence notifications for your most important hour of work. Every yes is a no to something else, so choose it deliberately, and ask whether someone on your team could take it instead.
- **Drop things out loud.** When something has to give, choose what moves and tell the people affected, rather than letting it slide on its own.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Scan the last three months of your calendar. Which important project has been “next week” for most of that time? Is it waiting on something outside your control, or on you choosing to make time for it?

Apply. This Sunday, or whatever day starts your week, write down three big rocks and put each one on your calendar before Monday begins.

Notice. Count how many times a day you check messages that could have waited an hour. Each one is a small decision about your priorities.

CHAPTER 6

Wellness

The Buckhead hotel from the last chapter, the one I was pre-opening as general manager, was down to the wire. We were racing to get it ready for our first guests. On the night before it opened, I realized I hadn't eaten since breakfast. The hotel was beautiful and the team was ready, and I felt terrible. Opening days run on adrenaline, and mine had run out.

For months, I had worked hard on my team's wellness. We set firm stop times, covered each other's shifts when someone needed a day, and held short check-ins that had nothing to do with hitting our goals. I had poured so much energy into them, but I had never turned the mirror toward myself. It was work, work, work.

A few weeks after the opening, things finally settled down. I had my first quiet morning in months, and I used it to look back at those pre-opening and opening days. What had worked? What hadn't? The team's wellness was on the "worked" list. Mine was on the other one. I had skipped meals, cut workouts, and put off the things that keep me steady, and I could see how it had shaped my patience, my decisions, and my mood. The people who needed me at my best had gotten what was left over.

That reflection gave me an idea. I needed to be as intentional about my own habits as I was about my team's. So I wrote down the daily habits that matter most to me. Six things made my list: *prayer, exercise, healthy eating, proper sleep, quality family time, and working on a personal goal*. Going through the process of creating that list made me see what I had let

slip, and I committed to doing better. I knew I needed to put my oxygen mask on first, before my team. Now I look at that list of six every day, before I tackle anything else. I'm not perfect at it. Some days I keep all six, and other days I don't. What matters is that I start again the next morning.

WELLNESS

Many of us work full time while caring for the people we love, and our own wellness ends up last on the list. Even in industries known for long hours and a breakneck pace, some balance is possible, and health and work don't have to compete. The first step is naming your own priorities, so that taking care of yourself sits on your to-do list right next to everything else.

Wellness is maintenance on the instrument you lead with. Whatever your list contains, whether it's sleep, movement, food, relationships, faith, or purpose, these are the inputs that decide whether you show up sharp and patient or tired and short. People who look after themselves well aren't the ones with the lightest schedules. They've decided in advance which few things they protect, and they hold onto them on the hard weeks as well as the easy ones. Energy also runs in cycles, not straight lines. Athletes get stronger by alternating effort with recovery, and so do leaders. A ten-minute walk, a real lunch away from the desk, or a few minutes to yourself between meetings refills more than you'd expect.

The effect on others is direct. A tired leader makes worse calls and has less patience, and the people around them feel it. In one study, on days after a leader slept poorly, their employees rated them as more hostile, and those teams were less engaged at work that day.³ Your wellness is never only about you. Showing up as your best self each day is part of the job, and it starts with what you do before the workday begins. Your habits also set the tone for everyone else's. Your team watches when you work, when you rest, and what you let slip, and they take their cue from you.

Watch for the early signs of burnout, in yourself and in your team: exhaustion that rest doesn't fix, a growing cynicism about the work, and a

sense that nothing you do makes a difference. Burnout isn't only a personal failing. It often grows out of the job itself, from too much work, too little control, or effort that goes unnoticed. You can't fix every cause, but you can notice, ask how people are doing, and remove what you can.

Carla produces large conferences, and her ten-day run in Denver is the highlight of her year. She's proud of how little she needs. Four hours of sleep, hotel coffee, a protein bar between sessions. "I'll rest when it's over," she tells her team, and she means it as encouragement.

By day seven, she sends hundreds of attendees the wrong shuttle times for the closing gala. She catches it at 4 a.m., fixes it, and then snaps at the audio-visual lead for a problem he didn't cause.

Luis manages lift operations at a ski resort, which means roughly a hundred and twenty days in a row with no real weekends. Ten years ago he ran the season on adrenaline and energy drinks. One January morning, short on sleep for the third straight week, he chewed out a young lift attendant in front of a line of guests over a mistake that wasn't hers. That night he couldn't stop thinking about her face.

Now he has three rules for the season: seven hours of sleep, twenty minutes outside on his own before the lifts open, and Sunday dinner with his kids, even if it means leaving the mountain early once a week. His assistant manager covers Sunday evenings. On the morning of the season's biggest storm, when two lifts go down and the phones won't stop, Luis is the calmest person in the operations office.

THE BLIND SPOT

The blind spot is taking care of everyone but yourself. Leaders who look after their teams often treat their own wellness as the thing that can wait, and it feels selfless. But a leader running on empty gives the team what's left over, and the team learns from watching. You send an email at 10 p.m. and add "no need to respond until morning," and you feel considerate. Your team sees something different. To them, the leader is working at 10 p.m., so that's what the job looks like. If you want people to protect their time off, you have to protect your own, where they can see it.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Pick your few, with sleep at the top.** Choose three to six personal priorities that keep you at your best. Include at least one about people, such as family, friends, or community. Sleep goes first, because it affects everything else on the list, including how you treat people.
- **Shrink them for hard weeks.** Decide now what the minimum version looks like when time is short: ten minutes instead of an hour, still done.
- **Switch off on purpose.** Even if you can't turn the work phone off, you can decide what's worth answering. Set a time when you stop checking email and messages, and arrange coverage so that only an emergency reaches you. Take short breaks during the day, too. Don't send emails after hours or on someone's day off, either. If you write at night, schedule them to go out the next morning. Rest is when you refill, and it's part of the work.
- **Take an honest inventory.** Look at where your time goes, what you're eating, and who you spend your days with. Watch for the early signs of burnout, in yourself and in your team. Be honest about where you are and where you want to be. Only you can change you.
- **Coach yourself, don't criticize yourself.** Cut the negative self-talk. Speak to yourself about your future choices the way a good coach

would.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Think back over your last three demanding stretches. What were the first things you dropped? Did you pick them back up afterward, or did they stay dropped until the next crisis?

Apply. Tonight, write down your personal priorities and the minimum version of each. Do the minimum version of one of them every day for seven days.

Notice. On the days you're short with people, look at what you skipped the day before.

PART TWO

Leading Others

Chapters 7–12

Think of the best leader you ever worked for, the one who got more out of you than you knew you had, and built the kind of team you wanted to be part of. Most of us can name that person quickly. This part of the book is about becoming that person for someone else. The day someone first reports to you, the job changes. Your own talent matters less than what you can bring out of other people. The six skills we'll focus on in this section are *servant leadership*, *belonging*, *developing others*, *giving feedback*, *listening and asking questions*, and *motivation and inspiration*. This is where new managers struggle most, because what earned the promotion doesn't build a team. It's also where experienced managers drift without anyone noticing, and the people who feel it first are the ones who report to you.

CHAPTER 7

Servant Leadership

I was always fascinated by the fact that some leaders had teams that would follow them into battle, and others had teams counting the minutes until the workday was over. They often had similar resources and hospitality backgrounds, and had gone through the same training over the years. But something else separated the good from the great.

I ended up going back to school and pursuing a Ph.D. focused on servant leadership in the hospitality industry, and in particular what happens to the people who work for a leader who puts their needs first: how they feel about their jobs, how they perform, and whether they stay.

What I came to see was that the best leaders I had worked for, and the ones I had tried to become, didn't treat their teams as people who existed to serve *them*. They saw themselves as there to serve *their* teams by asking what people needed to do their best work, clearing the way, and helping them grow, all while holding the bar high.

In some industries, a leader can watch the work. In ours, the work happens at a front desk with a line of guests, in a hallway at two in the morning, in a kitchen in the middle of a rush, and the leader is rarely there. Command and control can get you the right behavior in the moments you're watching. It can't get you the right behavior in the moments you aren't, and those moments are most of what the guest experiences. No one can be ordered into meaning it when they say "welcome."

The way a team is treated becomes the way a guest is treated. A team that feels served has a reason to go the extra mile for a stranger, and a team that feels commanded has a reason to do only what it's told. When a leader serves the people who serve the guest, hospitality stops being a standard on a wall and becomes something the team chooses to give.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

A servant leader measures success by one question: are the people I lead growing, and do they have what they need to do excellent work? The traditional org chart puts the leader at the top of a pyramid. Servant leadership turns it upside down. The team sits at the top, and the leader's job is to support them from below by removing obstacles, getting resources, developing skills, and taking the heat when it comes.

The idea has been around for a long time, and the term itself dates back more than fifty years.⁴ Interest in it has grown as more organizations have shifted their focus from profit at any cost toward responsibility for their people and communities. Servant leaders treat ethical behavior as non-negotiable, and they work to build an environment where doing the right thing is normal, even when no one is checking.

It also holds up because of what happens downstream. In any business built on service, servant leadership is the link between how an employee is served and how that employee serves the customer. The habits behind it aren't mysterious. They include listening first, empathy, a sense of stewardship for the people and resources in your care, and a commitment to each person's growth.

In practice, servant leadership comes down to five commitments, and each one connects to other skills in this book.

- **Serve people rather than seek status.** Use your authority to help people succeed, not to make yourself feel important, and let them have the credit when they do.
- **Lead with purpose and clarity.** Explain the mission, why it matters, and how each person's work contributes to it.

- **Develop people, and trust them.** Invest in their strengths and judgment, then give them the authority to act, including solving a guest's problem on the spot.
- **Combine compassion with accountability.** Treat people with dignity while keeping expectations clear, feedback honest, and poor performance addressed.
- **Model the behavior you expect.** Your integrity, humility, and consistency are what make you credible, and your actions have to match your words.

Greg is the rooms division manager at a 300-room hotel, and he talks about service constantly. Guest satisfaction scores open every meeting. His door, he likes to say, is always open.

His front desk agents have been asking for a fourth workstation since spring. On Friday afternoons, three agents share two working computers while the line of arriving guests reaches the lobby doors. They've raised it at three shift meetings and in one written request. Greg tells them it's in the capital plan and moves on to the scores. He hasn't worked a shift at the desk since his promotion two years ago, so he has never stood behind that counter at four on a Friday. When the desk's scores for check-in speed drop again, he schedules a refresher training on efficiency.

Simone runs ground operations for a motorcoach tour company: forty drivers, two dozen coaches, and guests from all over the world. She starts most mornings in the bus yard, not her office, and asks the drivers one question: "What's in your way today?"

For three weeks, the answer kept coming back to the dispatch radios, which dropped out on the bridge leg of the most popular route. Drivers were losing contact with dispatch for minutes at a time with a full coach of passengers. The vendor kept promising a fix. In the fourth week, Simone rode the route herself with a borrowed handheld, marked every dead zone on a map, and took it to the vendor's regional office in person. The repeaters were installed within two weeks.

Serving her drivers doesn't mean saying yes to everything. When one of them asked to skip the pre-trip safety inspection on busy mornings, she said no and stood next to him while he did it.

THE BLIND SPOT

The oldest trap is expecting the team to work for you instead of you working for them, and it can hide behind good intentions, like a door that's always open but never walked through. Some people might mistake servant leadership for softness, as if it meant saying yes to everyone, avoiding hard conversations, or doing other people's work for them. None of that serves anyone. Holding people to a high standard is part of serving them. So is an honest conversation about performance. Servant leaders still lead. They just point their authority at clearing the path for others. The other misreading is treating servant leadership as a technique, a few gestures performed for the team. People can tell the difference between a leader who serves them and one who's acting the part.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Ask what's in the way.** Make it a regular question, and write down the answers so you can see patterns.
- **Fix one obstacle visibly.** Pick something your team has raised more than once and solve it, then tell them it's solved.

- **Hand over the authority.** Let your team solve a guest's problem on the spot without checking with you first, and give them the credit when they do.
- **Work the front line.** Spend a few hours in your team's shoes on their hardest shift. You'll learn more than any report can tell you.
- **Keep the standard.** Serving people includes holding them to what they're capable of.
- **Ask what they want to learn.** Ask each person what they want to learn this year, and help them get there. The best measure of a servant leader is whether the people around them grow.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Consider the requests your team has made of you more than once in the past year. How many did you solve, and how many are still "in the plan"? What does that list say about whom you serve first?

Apply. Over the next few days, ask each person on your team what's in their way, and fix one of the answers before the week ends.

Notice. Listen for the moment someone stops raising a problem with you. That silence usually means they've given up. The problem is still there.

CHAPTER 8

Belonging

I was in my first role as a hotel general manager when I learned what it costs when people don't feel they belong.

Every Tuesday morning, my department heads met in the conference room to solve problems and find ways to make the guest experience better. For weeks, one problem kept coming back. Guests who ordered room service breakfast on Monday mornings were waiting far too long, and the complaints were piling up. We had changed the kitchen schedule. We had added a server. Nothing helped.

Jonah, an intern, sat at the end of the table each week to take notes. He had been with us for three weeks and had never said a word. I was focused on solving the problem at hand.

That Tuesday, we were going around in circles again. My director of food and beverage turned to him. "Jonah," she said, "do you have any ideas?"

He hesitated. Then he said that on Mondays the linen company delivered at the same time breakfast carts left the kitchen, and the service elevator was tied up for almost forty minutes. He had seen the carts waiting by the elevator on every one of his Mondays. He had assumed we knew.

None of us did. We moved the linen delivery to later in the morning. The following Monday, breakfast arrived on time, and the complaints stopped.

I thought about that for the rest of the day. Jonah had been in that room for three weeks, and he had the answer the whole time. It took the director of food and beverage asking him for any of us to hear it. I realized it was my job to build a team where no one has to be asked, where everyone feels their voice is welcome.

BELONGING

Belonging is the feeling that you're accepted as you are, that you matter to the people around you, and that you won't pay a price for being yourself. It's a basic human need, as real at work as anywhere else. It isn't the same as fitting in. People want to be part of the group and valued for what they bring that's different. No one can see belonging from the outside. Only the person feels it, and they begin deciding whether they have it on their first day.

You can tell when it's there. People who feel they belong speak up, ask for help, admit mistakes, and stay. Without it, people hold back, watch, and do only what they're asked. When people believe they can raise a concern, admit an error, or disagree without being embarrassed or punished, problems surface early and get fixed. When they don't, the leader is often the last to know. That belief is built in small moments, like whose idea gets credit, who gets interrupted, who eats lunch alone, and what happens to the person who says the uncomfortable thing.

Belonging is the leader's job, and in hospitality it's harder than it sounds. Shifts run around the clock, departments work apart from each other, and new people arrive every week. A seat on the team isn't enough. People decide whether they belong by watching what the leader does in the hard moments. Leaders set the tone by noticing who is on the edges and by making belonging part of how the team works every day. New people feel this most. In their first weeks, they're asking themselves whether they belong, and one awkward moment can feel like proof that they don't. It helps to tell them plainly that the first month is hard for everyone.

Heather is the banquet manager at a large hotel, and her full-time captains love her. She knows their kids' names, remembers their birthdays, and brings them coffee at Saturday morning setup.

On most nights, half her servers are on-call staff who work a few events a month. Heather doesn't know most of their names. They get the stations farthest from the kitchen, hear about menu changes from the captains, if at all, and eat standing up in the hallway while the full-timers take the break room. By June, Heather can't fully staff a Saturday wedding. Three of her best on-call servers have stopped picking up shifts, and one tells the staffing coordinator she never felt like part of the team.

Darnell manages the clubhouse at a country club with a long history and a changing staff. His servers range from a twenty-six-year veteran to college students in their first jobs.

Over the summer, Darnell notices a pattern. The longtime servers work the best sections, eat together, and joke in a shorthand the new hires don't get. The college students take the leftover tables and stand by the kitchen door on their breaks. One of them, three weeks in, has stopped asking questions. Darnell doesn't hand down a rule. He asks his twenty-six-year veteran for help, and she agrees to train each new server herself, side by side, on their first two weekends. He rotates sections so everyone gets a turn on the terrace, and he opens each pre-shift by asking one of the new hires what they noticed on the floor. By August, the new servers eat lunch with everyone else, and the one who had gone quiet is the first to speak up at pre-shift.

THE BLIND SPOT

It's easy to assume belonging takes care of itself if you're friendly and treat everyone the same, but friendliness alone won't get you there. People who have been talked over, doubted, or left out before will watch closely to see whether it's safe to be themselves here. And all of us lean toward people who remind us of ourselves. Without meaning to, leaders hand the stretch assignments, the praise, and the benefit of the doubt to the people they find easiest to relate to, and the people on the edges stay there.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Make the first day count.** Greet new people by name, introduce them to the team, give them a buddy, and check in at the end of their first shift. Tell them the first few weeks are hard for everyone, and that's normal.
- **Go around the room in reverse.** Ask the newest or most junior people to speak first, before the senior voices set the direction.
- **Protect the person who speaks up.** When someone raises a problem, thank them in front of the group, even if the news is unwelcome.
- **Step in early.** Address a disrespectful comment from a guest, a member, or a colleague the same day, and check on the person it was aimed at first.
- **Look at the edges.** Notice who eats alone, who isn't in the group chat, and who hasn't spoken in weeks. Reach out to them yourself.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Think about the people on your team who rarely speak in meetings. Over the past year, have they become more willing to speak or less? Is that because of who they are, or because of what has happened when others spoke up?

Apply. At your next team meeting, ask the newest person for their view first, and hold the silence until they answer.

Notice. Watch who gets interrupted in your meetings, and who does the interrupting. Include yourself.

CHAPTER 9

Developing Others

Not long after I became director of training at a large resort, the hotel ran an employee satisfaction survey that went to managers at every level, from supervisors to department heads. The lowest score on the entire survey was on the statement, *"I feel that I am being developed for the future."*

I met with the general manager and his direct reports: the director of rooms, the director of food and beverage, and the heads of sales, marketing, conventions, and human resources. None of us were surprised, and none of us had a plan. We decided to start by asking. My team and I began running focus groups with managers from every part of the hotel, and in each one I asked the same question: what areas would you like more development in?

The answers were more specific than any of us expected. Some managers wanted the skills for their next job. Others wanted to understand how other departments worked. Many simply wanted to know what the path looked like, and nobody had ever shown them one.

Based on what we heard, my team and I designed a development program that every manager could go through. It was a mix of classroom training, cross-training, and mentoring, all fueled by real-world examples from our own hotel, and it was built around each person's own potential rather than a one-size-fits-all curriculum. The executives backed it, and many of them taught sessions themselves.

The following year, the same survey went out. The statement that had scored lowest the year before had jumped to nearly the top of the list of what managers appreciated.

I stood there holding those results and understood what had changed. People no longer felt like they were just filling a role. They could see a future for themselves.

DEVELOPING OTHERS

Most people can do more than their current job asks of them. Developing others means helping each person see what they're capable of and then giving them the experiences to get there. It starts with a conversation about where they want to go and what skills will get them there. It continues with assignments that stretch them, and it depends on the leader stepping back far enough to let them do the work, including making some mistakes along the way. Underneath all of it is a belief that people can grow. Leaders who see talent as fixed stop investing in anyone who isn't already a star, and their people can feel it.

A leader's legacy rests here. Over a career, what you accomplish personally will matter less than what the people you developed went on to do. One good test: if you were promoted tomorrow, who on your team could step into your job? If the answer is no one, start there.

Development also keeps good people. Top performers who believe someone sees their potential and is investing in it usually stay. Those who feel stuck usually leave, often for a job that looks a lot like the one they had, at a company that asked them what they wanted. Developing people is different from managing their performance. A performance review asks how someone did. Development asks who they are becoming, and whether they have the judgment, strengths, and confidence to take on more than they hold today.

Don't assume people know what it takes to reach the next level. Spell it out. Work with each person on a short list: one or two strengths to build on, and one or two skills to develop. Give extra attention to your high performers, who are often overlooked because they seem fine. Once

you've trained someone and trust that they understand the expectations, give them the work and get out of the way. Micromanaging how a task gets done drains motivation, while ownership builds it. The amount of direction should match the person, with more for someone new to a task and less as they prove themselves.

Brian is the guest experience manager at a minor-league ballpark, and he's the best at nearly everything in his department. He can calm an angry season-ticket holder, fix the scanner at Gate C, and rewrite the usher schedule in twenty minutes. So when anything hard comes up, he does it himself. It's faster.

Kayla, his lead usher, has worked for him for four seasons. She's sharp and reliable, and she's never been handed the angry season-ticket holder, the schedule, or the budget. In August she gives notice. She's taking a supervisor job at the arena across town. "Nobody here ever asked what I wanted to do next," she tells him. Brian starts to say he was protecting her from the hard parts, and stops.

Teresa is the executive housekeeper at a resort with sixty room attendants and six supervisors. Each supervisor has a short written list, two skills they're working on this quarter, and Teresa reviews it with them every month over coffee.

This spring, her newest supervisor, Mark, had “leading the owner’s inspection” on his list. When the owner’s representative arrived for the quarterly walk-through, Teresa handed Mark the clipboard and stayed at the back of the group. On the fourth floor, Mark fumbled a question about the carpet replacement schedule, and Teresa felt every instinct in her body tell her to step in. She didn’t. Mark recovered, said he’d get the answer by the end of the day, and did. Afterward, over coffee, Teresa asked him what he’d do differently. Mark had three answers.

THE BLIND SPOT

The most common trap is believing it’s faster to do it yourself. In the moment, it usually is. Over a season, it’s slower, because you remain the bottleneck for everything difficult and your best people never grow. It’s also easy to confuse training with development. Training teaches someone to do today’s job well. Development prepares them for the next one, and it mostly happens through real work.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Ask where they want to go.** Have a direct conversation with each person about their goals, then agree on a strength to build and a skill to develop.
- **Hand over something real.** Give a stretch assignment with real stakes, not a practice exercise.
- **Step back, and stay close.** Let them lead, be available if they need you, and resist the urge to take over at the first stumble. Afterward, ask what they’d do differently before you share your view.
- **Teach from your own experience.** Share the lessons you’ve learned, including your mistakes. Some of the best development happens over coffee, when a leader explains how they handled something hard.

- **Tell your top performers you see them.** Don't assume they know they're valued. Say it, and show it with an investment.
- **Develop your replacement.** Pick one person who could do your job someday, and start teaching them the parts no one sees.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Make a list of the hardest recurring tasks in your area. Who handles each one? If the answer is you, for most of the list, what has that meant for the growth of the people around you?

Apply. In the next few days, hand one of those tasks to someone on your team, along with the context they need. Then step back and let them run it.

Notice. The next time you think, "It's faster if I just do it," ask whether that's true for the next year, or only for the next hour.

Giving Feedback

As director of rooms at a large resort, I oversaw housekeeping, public area custodial, the front office, recreation, the spa, engineering, and the valet and bell teams. For years, giving feedback was something that always made me nervous. I rehearsed conversations in my head for days. I worried I would hurt the person, or damage a relationship I valued. I told myself the problem might fix itself. Sometimes I softened what I planned to say until it barely sounded like feedback at all.

In that role, I couldn't afford to wait any longer. One of my housekeeping supervisors was well liked and worked harder than almost anyone. But I had noticed something that was holding her back, and I was fairly sure no one had ever told her.

I asked her to meet me in my office first thing in the morning, before her shift got busy, with the door closed. I started by telling her why. "I'm asking you to meet because I think you could be a great leader here, and I want to share something you may not know about."

Then I described what I had seen, in terms of what happened and not who she was. "On Saturday, you named an attendant and the room she had missed over the radio, so everyone on the channel heard it, including the front desk and half of housekeeping. I have heard you do this a number of times. The effect is that people have stopped answering the radio quickly, and the attendants have started hiding mistakes instead of telling you about them." I paused and asked what she thought.

She was silent for a long moment. Then she said, “I had no idea. I thought I was being quick and efficient.” I could see it was hard for her to hear, and it was hard for me to say. I didn’t apologize for any of it. We talked through what to change, and I asked her to choose where to start. She decided that from then on she would use the radio only for logistics, give corrections in person and in private, and save the public attention for praise.

Some time later, she stopped me in the hallway. “Thank you for telling me,” she said. “Nobody else ever did.” I told her she was the one who had done the hard part, and I meant it. I had spent weeks dreading a conversation that took twenty minutes, and all it asked of me was to say what she needed to hear.

GIVING FEEDBACK

The feedback people remember, and use, has a few things in common. It’s specific, timely, and about behavior. It describes what happened, what the person did, what effect it had, and what would work better next time. It’s given privately when it’s corrective and publicly when it’s praise. And it happens often, in small doses, rather than saved up for an annual review where it arrives months late and in a pile. Don’t save feedback only for problems, either. Telling someone exactly what worked, and why, shows them what their best looks like so they can do it again.

Most people want this kind of feedback more than leaders assume. They want to succeed, and they can’t improve what no one tells them about. Many people say they prefer honest, corrective feedback to praise alone, because praise feels good but doesn’t show them what to do differently. Feedback also lets people see themselves the way others see them, which they can’t do on their own. A team where feedback flows freely, in every direction, improves faster than one where everyone is being polite.

That flow shouldn’t only run downhill. In a feedback-rich team, people ask for feedback and give it to colleagues and managers too, and that starts with a leader who asks for it and takes it well. The best

feedback also carries care and candor together. People accept hard news from someone who clearly wants them to succeed, and they dismiss it from someone who seems to enjoy delivering it. One simple line makes hard feedback easier to hear. Tell the person you're raising it because you hold a high standard and believe they can meet it. That's what I was doing in that office with my housekeeping supervisor, before I said a word about the radio.

Be clear and honest, and describe the facts without judgment. Talking around a problem in circles only confuses people. This is where compassion and accountability meet. Caring about someone doesn't mean sparing them the truth, and holding someone accountable doesn't mean withholding respect. The leader who does both treats people with dignity and still expects them to meet the standard.

Sometimes the same miss comes back after the conversation. Before you decide the person is the problem, check your side first. Was the expectation clear, in plain words? Did they know why it matters and what it affects? Did they have what they needed to do it? Often one of those answers is no, and the fix is yours to make. I've made this mistake myself. In that same director of rooms job, a different manager in my division nodded through my feedback and changed nothing. When I asked myself why, I had to admit I had hinted at the problem instead of naming it.

But if every answer is yes and the miss keeps coming back, the next conversation has to be plainer than the first one. Say that it has happened before, say what you expect and by when, and say what comes next if it continues. Feedback that is kind but unclear, given over and over, lets a person keep missing the mark until the problem becomes a decision about their job. And sometimes the honest conclusion is that the person isn't right for the role. That's a conversation about fit, and it can still be held with respect.

Megan is a lead flight attendant, and the whole crew calls her the nicest purser on the line. A newer attendant, Ryan, has been dismissive with passengers for weeks: short answers, eye-rolls, the drink cart pushed away mid-question. Megan has mentioned it once, sort of. “Great flight today! Maybe just watch the tone a little?” Ryan has no idea what she means.

Then a passenger files a formal complaint naming Ryan. In the galley, in front of two other attendants, Megan finally lets it all out. Every incident from the past month, in one long list. Ryan goes red, and the other attendants stare at the floor.

Sam manages production for an event staging company, and on show days he lives on the radio. During a general session for eighteen hundred people, a stagehand named Tyler misses a lighting cue. The CEO walks onstage in the dark for six seconds. Sam says nothing on the radio.

At load-out, he finds Tyler alone by the truck. “How do you think the opening went?” he asks first. Tyler knows. Sam keeps it simple. “In the opening, you were on your phone during standby, and the cue for the CEO’s walk-on came late. He was in the dark for six seconds, in front of the whole room and the client. Next show, phone in the case from standby until the walk-on is done. Can you do that?” Tyler says yes. The whole conversation takes ninety seconds.

On the radio the next morning, Sam tells the whole crew that Jasmine’s quick save on a dead microphone kept the keynote on time. He names her and says exactly what she did.

THE BLIND SPOT

We soften feedback because vague feels kind. But a hint that the other person can't decode leaves them repeating the same mistake until it becomes a bigger problem, and then they hear about it all at once, often in front of others. Feedback about attitude has the same problem. "You need to be more positive" gives a person nothing to change. "You sighed twice when the guest asked about the refund" does.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Use four parts.** Start by telling them why you're raising it: you hold a high standard and believe they can meet it. Then describe the situation, the behavior, the effect it had, and what to do next time, sticking to the facts and to what the person did.
- **Give it soon and often.** Feedback within a day is useful. Feedback three months later is history. Small, frequent doses beat a once-a-year pile.
- **Praise in public, correct in private.** Name the specific thing someone did well, and why it worked, where others can hear it. Never point out someone's weaknesses in front of others.
- **Ask first, and ask for it yourself.** "How do you think it went?" often gets the person halfway there on their own. Then turn it around regularly: "What's one thing I could do better?"
- **When a miss repeats, check your side, then say so plainly.** Make sure the expectation was clear and the person had what they needed. If it was, name that it has happened before, say what you expect and by when, and say what comes next.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Is there one person you've been meaning to give corrective feedback to for a while? How long has it been? What has the delay cost them, the team, and you?

Apply. Have that conversation this week. Write out the four parts first, and keep it under five minutes.

Notice. Over the week, count how often you describe a behavior and how often you describe an attitude.

CHAPTER 11

Listening & Asking Questions

The rooftop bar at the Buckhead hotel I opened took off in a way none of us had predicted. The only way up was a private glass elevator that rose along the outside of the building, lit up against the night sky. By evening, the line for the bar wrapped around the street in front of the hotel. Black cars idled in the drive. Celebrities came through regularly, and word spread fast that this was the place to be in Atlanta. Up on the roof, the sun dropped behind the skyline and the music turned up.

I had run hotels with popular bars before. I had never run anything like this. It was exciting, and it was a lot, with a crowd we hadn't planned for and a hotel full of sleeping guests right below it.

While it was great for revenue, the ever-growing lines were an issue we had to manage. Rather than come up with a plan on my own, I went to the people who knew this bar best. I sat down with our bar team and the experts who ran it every night. I asked our security team, our front desk, and our doormen to walk me through what they saw from where they stood. What are we missing? What would you change if it were your call? What do you think this looks like in six months?

Then I listened. I wrote down every answer and let each person finish before I said a word.

Over the next few weeks, we put the pieces together as a team. Our doormen pointed out that the line was longest just when late arrivals were checking in. Security suggested a separate entrance for hotel guests, and the front desk offered each of them a card that skipped the line. The

plan we landed on used all three, and it was better than anything I could have come up with on my own.

We rolled it out in phases, checked in with the team each week, and adjusted as we learned. Within a couple of months, the line was under control, and the bar was still a strong driver of revenue.

LISTENING & ASKING QUESTIONS

Leaders who listen well give the person in front of them their full attention. They ask a question, then let the answer finish. They write down the idea that sparked in their head instead of interrupting to share it. And before they respond, they check that they understood: “Here’s what I think you want me to know. Did I get that right?” Good listening isn’t just staying quiet, though. The best listeners ask follow-up questions that help the other person think it through, and people leave the conversation feeling heard and a little clearer than when they started.

Leading with questions instead of answers changes what a leader learns. Open questions bring out information that would otherwise never reach the top. The payoff compounds. When people see their ideas heard and put to use, they bring more. When they see their ideas ignored, they stop bringing them. Colin Powell described the cost this way: “The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.”⁵

Your highest priority as a leader can’t be expressing your own ideas and convincing others to buy into them. Be interested in other people, and encourage them to talk. Ask questions to get clearer, to understand the context, and to keep the conversation going, never to steer people toward an answer you’ve already chosen. Good questions are often simple: What do I need to know? Why do we have this problem? How would you solve it? What do you think? Can you challenge my thinking here? And listen for more than words. Tone, a pause, and what someone leaves out often tell you as much as what they say.

Victor is the executive chef at a farm-to-table restaurant, and his Monday menu meeting runs forty minutes. He talks for thirty-eight of them: the produce coming in, the dishes he's planning, the plating he wants. At the end, he closes his notebook and says, "Thoughts?" Then he stands up.

His sous chef, Nina, has had a plan for the brunch bottleneck at the egg station for six weeks. She brought it up once, in March. Victor said, "Let's talk about it later," and they never did. The line cooks have stopped offering ideas at all. They've noticed that Victor asks for input the way people say "How are you?" in a hallway. On Sunday, the egg station falls behind again, and Victor tells the line they need to move faster.

Amanda is the general manager of a full-service hotel, and every morning at nine, before the checkout rush, she walks the property with a different housekeeper, bellman, or front desk agent. Each time, she asks the same question: "What's the dumbest rule we have?"

In June, a nineteen-year-old bellman named Caleb told her it was the rule that sent every guest asking for a late checkout to the front desk, even when they were standing right beside him with their luggage. Amanda repeated it back to make sure she had it: "So you can't answer a guest who's standing right next to you?" He nodded. A week later, bell staff were allowed to approve late checkouts up to one hour and note them in the system. At the next all-staff meeting, Amanda told everyone whose idea it was.

THE BLIND SPOT

Listening gets treated as the quiet part between your own turns to speak. Many people wait, half-planning their response, and then answer the question they expected to hear. Others ask questions that are statements in disguise: “Don’t you think we should...?” People recognize a question with only one acceptable answer. Asking it teaches them that the leader isn’t looking for their thinking, only their agreement.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Let the answer finish.** Put the phone face down. Count to three after someone stops talking before you respond. If an idea hits you mid-conversation, write it down and keep listening.
- **Play it back.** Summarize what you heard and ask whether you got it right.
- **Ask questions you don’t know the answer to.** “What am I missing?” beats “Don’t you agree?” every time.
- **Ask “What else?”** The first answer is rarely the whole answer. One more “What else?” often brings out the thing someone was hesitant to say.
- **Close the loop.** Wherever you can, put people’s ideas to use. When you do, tell them, and let the team know where the idea came from.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Think about the last month of meetings you led. What share of the time were you talking? How many ideas from your team did you put into action, and do the people who offered them know it?

Apply. In one conversation this week, ask a single open question and say nothing else until the other person has finished their full answer.

Notice. Forming your reply while someone is still speaking is a sign you’ve stopped listening. Set it down and go back.

CHAPTER 12

Motivation & Inspiration

Early in my career, I was an assistant front desk manager at a convention hotel, and I worked for a leader who believed one thing above all else: take care of the people who work here, and they'll take care of our guests, and our guests will come back.

She sat down with our team and set one goal for the year: the highest employee satisfaction the front desk had ever seen. Then she asked each of us what would make it true, and she wrote down every answer. The plan came straight from us. Agents could swap shifts on a sign-up board instead of asking permission. Everyone had a say in the holiday schedule, and weekends rotated fairly so no one worked every one. If any of us wanted to try something new, like learning another part of the hotel, we could sit down and talk to her about it. And once a month, we had a surprise celebration in the office, just because.

She knew a goal on paper doesn't change how it feels to come to work, so she made sure we could see who we were doing it for. Every week, she put new guest letters on the wall of the employee hallway. She came to our front desk pre-shift meetings and read a line aloud. Then she looked up, said the name of the person it was about, and the whole room turned. A traveler wrote that an agent had found him a quiet room after a canceled flight and "saved the whole trip." She said the name, and the agent stood a little taller. A meeting planner wrote that her registration line moved so smoothly she forgot to worry. "That's the whole front desk team," she said.

She did it every week, even in the middle of the biggest conventions, when it would have been easy to skip. I had heard plenty of leaders say they valued people. I had never watched one make people feel it.

I still do all those things to this day because of her. I post the letters. I walk into the pre-shifts, including the ones in the kitchen, the laundry, and engineering, where guests never watch the work happen. Those teams almost never see their names in a guest letter, so it's my job to connect the dots. When a guest writes that their stay was wonderful, I make sure the people behind the scenes hear that it was about them, too.

MOTIVATION & INSPIRATION

Motivation and inspiration work together, but they aren't the same thing. Motivation moves people toward a goal through recognition, a thank-you, a fair reward, or a leader who knows their name and notices their effort. Inspiration answers why the work matters. It's what keeps people going when the motivation wears thin, on the long double or at the end of a hard week. Purpose is what makes that possible. People work harder for a mission they understand than for a task they were handed, so a leader's role includes explaining why the work matters and helping each person see how their own part contributes to it.

One of the most powerful sources of inspiration costs nothing. It's showing people the effect of their work on another human being. In one study, university fundraising callers who spent a few minutes meeting a student whose scholarship their calls had helped pay for went on to raise more than twice as much money in the month that followed.⁶ Nothing about the job had changed except that they had seen the why. Leaders can create that connection, and they can pair it with one more step by telling each person, directly, that they believe in them.

Most of what motivates people is simple and costs little. Get to know each person on your team, recognize the unique contribution each one makes, and thank them, individually and often. Every person on a team wants to know that their specific work counts. That need is about contribution, and people stay most engaged when they feel valued for

what they in particular bring. Simple gestures usually beat grand ones.

Lasting motivation also comes from inside the work itself: some control over how you do your job, the satisfaction of getting better at a skill, and a connection to something bigger than the task. On any given day, few things lift people more than making progress on meaningful work, even a small step, and few things drain them faster than an obstacle no one removes. So clear the path, and point out the progress. How people feel about themselves is closely tied to how satisfied they are at work, so building up your team is never wasted effort.

Tara owns a wedding planning company with eight planners, and she works hard at motivation. There's a bonus for every five-star review, a pizza lunch when the team hits a monthly target, and a sales leaderboard on the office wall.

Her planners still leave at a steady clip, about three a year. In her inbox sits a folder of thank-you notes from couples, hundreds of them, some with photos, a few that would melt anyone's heart. One is from a bride whose outdoor ceremony was rained out with two hours' notice. She wrote that her planner, Jenna, moved everything inside so smoothly that most of the guests never knew there had been another plan. Tara reads it, smiles, and files it. Jenna never sees it. She leaves in the spring, telling a friend the job has started to feel like nothing but selling.

Steve is the golf course superintendent at a private club, and he doesn't give speeches. His crew of eighteen starts at five in the morning, most of them out on mowers before sunrise, alone, for hours.

Before the club championship each year, Steve does two things. He walks the whole crew out to the eighteenth green at the end of their shift and shows them the course from there, every line they mowed and every bunker they raked. “That’s yours,” he says, and nothing else. And when a member writes the club about the course, Steve prints the letter and reads it aloud at the next morning’s crew meeting, including the name of the person who mowed the hole the writer mentioned. He’s gruff, and he gets the names right every time.

THE BLIND SPOT

Rewards are easy to hand out, so they end up doing the work of inspiration. Bonuses, contests, and perks can motivate in the short term, and fair pay is important. But a reward answers the question “What do I get?” and leaves “Why does this matter?” unanswered. When the reward stops or loses its novelty, the effort goes with it. The deeper source of energy, people seeing that their work matters to someone, is already sitting in the leader’s inbox.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Share the why.** Connect each person’s daily work to the outcome it creates for someone real.
- **Pass along the thank-yous.** Forward or read aloud every compliment from a guest or customer, with the team member’s name in it.
- **Bring the letters to the back of the house.** Most compliments name the people guests can see, but every one of them took a team. When a guest raves about dinner, read it to the cooks and dishwashers. When a guest loves their room, take it to housekeeping, laundry, and engineering. Tell them, “This is yours too.”

- **Thank people specifically.** “Thanks for staying late to reset the room for the early group” lands far better than “Great job.”
- **Say that you believe in them.** Tell people directly that you see their potential and that you expect them to succeed.
- **Give people room, and clear their path.** Whenever you can, let people decide how to do their work, and remove what’s slowing them down. Ownership and progress are two of the strongest motivators there are.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Look at the last ten compliments your area received from guests or customers, online or in your inbox. Which ones reached the people who earned them, and which stopped with you?

Apply. At your next pre-shift or team meeting, share one piece of praise from a guest or customer with the person or team who earned it, in front of their coworkers.

Notice. What your team talks about when they talk about their work is a clue. If it’s mostly numbers and rewards, they may have lost sight of the why.

PART THREE

Leading the Business

Chapters 13–18

At some point the question shifts from how your team is doing to how the whole business is doing, and your choices reach people you may never meet. The six skills we'll focus on in this section are *creating the culture, business acumen and decision-making, vision and strategy, setting goals and expectations, leading change*, and *innovation and continuous improvement*. These are the skills of the general manager, the regional director, and the hotel owner, and they are also worth building long before you hold those titles.

CHAPTER 13

Creating the Culture

On my first day as the general manager of a resort right on the ocean, nobody knew who I was, so I spent it as a guest. I ate in the restaurants, walked the pool areas and the spa, and watched how things ran when no one was performing for the boss.

Everyone I met was friendly, and I wrote that down first. But when I asked a server at lunch what time the spa closed, she told me that was a question for the front desk. The front desk suggested I call the spa. Every department had its own way of doing things, and nobody was sure where one ended and the next began.

Over the next few weeks, I met with employees in small groups, from every department and every shift, and asked what it was like to work there. They were proud of the resort and loved our guests. What they wanted most was for the departments to stop pointing at each other and start helping each other, and to have what they needed to do the job well.

Then I sat down with my leadership team. Before we touched a single goal, we wrote down a few values, each with a sentence about what it looks like in practice, in the words an employee would use. One of ours was “Own it”: if a guest asks you for something, it’s yours until you’ve walked them to the person who can solve it.

We also made a few promises to one another, because the way we treated each other would set the tone for how our teams treated guests. We would not make a decision that affected another department without talking to its leaders first. And we would share guest comments in our

own meetings, so we all heard how our work landed.

We acted on what we'd heard right away. We started a monthly all-staff meeting, every department in the same room, and each of us fixed what we could from our teams' lists within the month. And we led by example. When one of us got something wrong, we said so in front of our teams. When a guest stopped any of us in a corridor, we walked them to the right person ourselves, even when it put us behind.

We added one more habit. At the start of each pre-shift, a leader told a short story from the day before about someone living one of the values. After a few months, the stories started coming from the team instead of from us.

About a year later, I was in a corridor outside one of the restaurants when a guest asked a host where she could find the spa. He stopped what he was doing and said, "Let me take you." He walked her the whole way and introduced her to the person at the desk by name.

CREATING THE CULTURE

Every organization has a culture, whether its leaders shape it or not. It's how people feel about the place, what it's like to work there, and how things get done when no one is watching. The strongest cultures pair two things that are often treated as opposites: a place people enjoy coming to work, and clear standards with real accountability. Warmth without standards drifts. Standards without warmth burn people out.

Leaders shape culture through a handful of steady habits, including clarity about the mission and goals, frequent and honest communication, recognition, a spirit of fun, and the development of each person toward their potential. They shape it even more through their own behavior and what they tolerate. People copy what they see more than what they hear, so a leader who preaches respect but cuts others off in meetings teaches the opposite of what they say. Culture is the first place to start, because a brilliant strategy will stall in a culture that won't carry it.

All of it rests on trust. People trust a leader who is believable, who treats them with respect, and who is fair. In a hotel, fairness is concrete.

It's who gets the weekend off, who gets the busy shift, and whether the rules apply to the top performer the same way they apply to the new hire. Trust also grows when it's safe to speak up. Leaders who admit their own mistakes and thank the people who bring them bad news make it safe for everyone else to do the same. And people need to know why their work matters here. Pride in the work, and in the place, is one of the clearest signs of a healthy culture.

Culture also never stands still. Left unmanaged, it drifts. It helps to think of it in layers, a model long associated with the organizational psychologist Edgar Schein.⁷ On top are the things anyone can see and hear: the way people greet each other, the meetings, the break room. Below that are the values an organization says it holds. Underneath are the unspoken assumptions about how things work around here, and that deepest layer is set by what leaders do, reward, and allow. Who gets promoted, what the performance review counts, and who gets the stretch assignments tell people what this place values more clearly than any card in a badge holder.

So check on it the way you'd check any other result: how many people leave and why, what employees write in survey comments, and what new hires tell you after their first few months. Ask people what it's like to work here and what would make it better, then show them what you did with the answers.

Hiring is where a culture is protected or watered down, because every new person either adds to it or pulls against it. Over years of hiring and leading teams, I learned that you can teach almost any skill, but you can't teach someone to care. So hire for the desire to serve, warmth, steadiness under pressure, and reliability, and train the rest. Ask every candidate the same core questions, let the team meet the finalists, and treat the first ninety days as part of hiring, with a good colleague beside the new person and frequent check-ins. And be honest about the job. A promise made in an interview that the workplace can't keep is the fastest way to lose a new hire's trust.

Doug is the general manager of a downtown hotel. The company's values are printed on a laminated card in every employee's badge holder, and the first one is "We Care." Doug talks about culture at every town hall.

His director of sales is the hotel's top revenue producer and makes the sales coordinators miserable. He belittles them in meetings, rewrites their work without a word, and takes credit for their bookings. Everyone in the building knows it. Doug knows it too. He has decided the numbers are worth it, and this spring he nominated him for the company's top sales award. More than half the sales office turned over last year. Last month, a coordinator who had been there three years cleaned out her desk and left her laminated values card on top of the keyboard.

Maria took over guest operations at a mid-sized zoo and found two teams that barely spoke. The animal keepers saw guest services as the people who sold popcorn. Guest services saw the keepers as the people who wouldn't answer questions. Each side complained about the other in its own break room.

She didn't start with a values statement. In her first month, she put every new guest services hire on a half-day shadow shift with a keeper, and every keeper on a two-hour shift at the front gate in July. She started a Friday "best moment" huddle, where anyone could tell a story from the week, and she always went last. And she drew lines. When a keeper rolled his eyes at a guest's question in front of a family, Maria spoke with him that afternoon, kindly and plainly. A year later, keepers were volunteering for the gate shift, and the break-room complaints had become the occasional joke.

THE BLIND SPOT

It's tempting to think culture is what you say: the values card, the town hall speech, the mission on the wall. People don't learn culture from words. They learn it by watching what happens to the high performer who treats others badly, the person who makes an honest mistake, and the person who raises a concern. They watch who gets promoted and who gets celebrated. The behavior a leader tolerates sets the real standard, and everyone can see it.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Close the gap.** Write down your stated values and what happens day to day. Then deal with the person whose conduct contradicts them, no matter how well they perform, and make sure promotions reward how people work, not only their numbers.
- **Hire for the desire to serve.** Ask every candidate the same core questions, let the team meet the finalists, and treat the first ninety days as part of hiring.
- **Go first on mistakes.** Say "I got that wrong" out loud, and thank the person who brings you bad news.
- **Build bridges between teams.** Put people in each other's shoes through shadow shifts and shared projects.
- **Make recognition and fun a ritual.** Set a regular time when stories of good work get told, and protect a little room for fun. People work harder for a place they enjoy.
- **Check the pulse.** Watch turnover, read the survey comments, and ask new hires after a few months what surprised them. Then tell people what you're changing because of what they said.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. What's the behavior in your organization that everyone knows about and no one addresses? How long has it gone on? What has your silence taught the people watching?

Apply. This week, ask three employees from different departments what it's like to work here and what would make it better. Listen to the whole answer, then tell each of them one thing you'll do about it.

Notice. Watch what new employees copy in their first month. That's your culture, whatever the card says.

Business Acumen & Decision-Making

Early in my career I was the front desk manager at a hotel. I knew the department well and had developed a good operational sense around how things worked. I knew which days of the week would be busiest and which times I needed to schedule the most staff. I trusted my operator gut feeling to tell me how many people I needed on each shift, and for how long.

One morning I was in the weekly department head meeting, there to talk about the front desk. Partway through, the general manager pulled up the payroll report on the screen and turned to me. “Front desk payroll was nine percent over budget last month, and occupancy came in right on forecast,” he said. “Where did it go? And what’s the plan for next month?”

I could tell them everything about what was happening at the desk: who had checked in, how long the lines had been on Friday, and which groups were arriving. I couldn’t tell them where the money went. I said I would look into it.

The director of finance answered in about thirty seconds. Most of the overage was overtime, and most of the overtime came from a handful of shifts where we had staffed light and paid time-and-a-half to fill the gap. The general manager nodded, and the meeting moved on to the next item.

I sat there and realized something I would never forget. I had been making dozens of decisions a week, about who worked when and how many people each shift needed, on instinct alone, without knowing what

any of them did to the number the whole hotel was watching.

I made a decision that day to do something that I'm sure seemed odd to all my peers at the time. I went to the director of finance and asked if I could be transferred into his department whenever the next opening came up. I loved operations, and moving to the finance office wasn't an obvious career move. I knew that if I wanted to lead at the highest level one day, financial acumen was something I would need to have mastered.

I only worked in finance for a few years. Looking back, it was some of the most valuable learning of my entire hospitality career. It taught me that operational knowledge was only half of the picture, and using data to inform good decision making is a skill that every hospitality leader must have.

BUSINESS ACUMEN & DECISION-MAKING

Business acumen is knowing how your organization makes money, what drives its results, and where it stands right now. It starts with identifying the handful of key performance indicators that matter most, the KPIs, and setting up a reliable way to see them often. Revenue and profit are part of the picture. So are guest satisfaction, turnover, safety, and whatever else drives your business. In a hotel, the core measures usually start with occupancy, average daily rate, revenue per available room, and how much of each new revenue dollar flows through to profit. Looking at several measures together, rather than only the financials, keeps any one of them from improving at the expense of the others.⁸

Data becomes useful in four stages. Describe what happened, diagnose why, predict what's likely next, and prescribe what to do about it. Leaders with strong business acumen move through all four quickly and focus the team's urgency on the few numbers that need it.

Knowing where the money comes from, where it goes, and which levers move which numbers also lets a leader explain a decision in plain language to owners, boards, and teams. When the people doing the work know the numbers and how their jobs move them, they start making better decisions without being told.

Business acumen is only worth what it helps you decide, and most real decisions have to be made before the picture is complete. Waiting for certainty feels safe, but it has a cost. Chances pass, people stall, and the team learns that nothing moves until the leader is sure. Good leaders decide when they have enough, not everything, and adjust as they learn.

How much you need depends on how hard the decision is to undo. Most decisions can be reversed at little cost: a schedule, a price, a trial menu. Make those quickly and fix them if they're wrong. A few can't be easily undone: a long contract, a major hire, a renovation. Slow down for those, gather more, and ask the people who will live with the result what could go wrong. One simple way to ask is to imagine it's a year from now and the decision has failed, then write down why. Then make room for the other side. Ask the person most likely to disagree to make the case against, because the evidence that agrees with us is always easier to see.

Three habits make decisions stick. Say out loud who decides, so nobody waits on a person who thinks it's someone else's call. Set a deadline, because a decision with no date is just a debate. And explain the reason in plain words, because people carry out a decision better when they understand it. When a call turns out to be wrong, own it. "That one was mine" costs a leader very little and earns a great deal.

Finally, don't let data replace judgment. The numbers tell you what happened and often why. They rarely tell you what your people will do about it, or what a guest will feel. The leaders people trust most use both what the data says and what they know from standing in the work.

Lauren is the general manager of a boutique hotel, and the guests adore her. She knows the regulars by name, remembers how they take their coffee, and greets half of them at the door herself. Her guest scores are among the best in the company.

She reads the monthly financial package the night before each owners' meeting. At the March meeting, the owners' asset manager asks a simple question: restaurant covers are up twelve percent, so why is food and beverage profit down? Lauren doesn't know. She promises an answer by the next meeting, and in April it turns out food costs had been climbing for five months on a menu no one had repriced. The owners start asking for more reports.

Tom runs a convention center, and every Monday at seven he spends thirty minutes with a one-page scorecard of six measures, from revenue per event day and food and beverage margin to safety incidents and utility cost, each against last year and budget.

In February, the utility line jumped eleven percent while event days were flat. He asked his chief engineer why, and they found it: the exhibit halls were heated and cooled on a fixed schedule, not on the event calendar. Left alone, the problem would cost about ninety thousand dollars by spring. Within a month, the building automation was tied to the booking system. Tom spent no time on the twenty other numbers that had also moved.

In April, a client asked him to hold the main hall for a November conference, with an answer due Friday and a soft attendance estimate. The hold could be released at no charge until August, so it was easy to undo. Tom told his sales director he'd make the call himself by Thursday, then said yes on what he knew. When the estimate came in lower in June, he released half the hall and told the sales team why.

THE BLIND SPOT

Leaders who rose through operations or guest service can slip into believing the numbers belong to the finance team, and that their own strength is with people. But a leader who can't explain what drives the results will eventually lose the authority to decide, because someone else will make the calls on the numbers alone. Some leaders go the other way and drown in data, treating every number that moves as an emergency. Others wait for the numbers to make the decision for them. Data narrows the choices, but it doesn't make the call, and a leader who waits for certainty usually decides late, which is also a decision.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Pick your few measures.** Choose five to eight KPIs that best show the health of your business, across finances, customers, people, and operations. Look at them weekly, at the same time, against last year and against your plan.
- **Ask the four questions, then choose where to spend your urgency.** What happened? Why? What will happen next? What should we do? Then pick the one or two numbers that need action this week, and say clearly why.
- **Learn one new number, and teach the numbers.** Each month, take one line from the financial statements you don't fully understand and learn what drives it. Then show your team the measures that count and how their daily work moves them. People can't help improve what they can't see.
- **Decide when you have enough.** Sort each decision by how easy it is to undo. Move fast on the easy ones and slow down on the hard ones. Before a big one, imagine it has failed, and ask someone to argue the other side.
- **Say who decides, by when, and why.** Name the decider and the deadline, explain the reason in plain words, and own the outcome,

including when it's wrong.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Recall the last three times someone asked you a question about your results that you couldn't answer on the spot. Was it the same kind of question each time? What does that pattern say about where your understanding stops?

Apply. Choose one decision you're facing right now. Write down how easy it would be to undo, who decides, and by when, and tell the people it affects.

Notice. The first number you look at when the monthly report arrives says something. Ask whether it's the most important number or the most comfortable one.

CHAPTER 15

Vision & Strategy

I had recently become general manager of a beautiful condo hotel in South Florida. In my first weeks, my leadership team and I wrote our vision in one sentence: to be the hotel in South Florida where luxury feels personal. Owners or weekend visitors, we wanted all of them to feel it. We repeated that line in every meeting and every pre-shift until people could say it in their sleep.

A few months later, I was on vacation when a promoter called our director of sales. He wanted to buy out the pool deck and half our rooms for a three-day spring break party. The money was real, more than we would have made that weekend any other way, and nobody would have blamed her for saying yes.

She said no. She thought about what three days of loud music and crowded lounge chairs would mean for the couple celebrating an anniversary, the family on their one big trip of the year, and the owners who had chosen us for the opposite reason. She thanked him and pointed him to a venue across town that was built for that kind of weekend.

When I got back, she walked me through it. “I asked myself if it got us closer to being the hotel where luxury feels personal,” she said. “It didn’t.” She didn’t need me to make the call. She only needed to know where we were going.

VISION & STRATEGY

A vision tells people where the organization is going and why it matters. A good one is simple enough to repeat from memory and compelling enough to point everyone's energy in the same direction. Once people know the destination, they can make dozens of decisions on their own each day that move toward it. That's what my director of sales did with the spring break party. Without a vision, every decision has to come back to the leader, or it goes in a different direction. When the vision is clear and the reason for it is explained, people spend less energy guessing and more time doing.

Strategy is the plan for getting there. A good one has three parts: an honest diagnosis of the biggest challenge in your way, a clear choice about how you'll meet it, and a handful of actions that work together. One way to test it is to list the few things the business does that matter most to its guests, then check that each one supports the others. Many leaders also receive a strategy from a larger organization above them. Their job is to weave it together with their own, while watching the economic, competitive, and environmental forces that could change the plan.

Both start with an honest look at where you are today. Before deciding where to go, name what's getting in the way and why. Skip that step, and a strategy becomes a list of things you'd like to happen. And a vision only works if people can see themselves in it. The strongest visions aren't simply handed down. They put words to something people already care about, so ask your team what they would be proud for the place to become. Everyone on the team should understand the mission and goals, where you're going and why, and great leaders help each person connect their daily work to that bigger picture, so the vision shows up in how a frontline employee greets a customer or how a manager plans next week's schedule.

Phil owns a small tour company in a beach town: two boats, a van, and a dozen guides. When people ask about his vision, he says he wants to be “the best tour on the island.” What that means changes every few months.

Last year it meant sunset cruises. Then kayak rentals. Then a deal with a cruise line for large-group shore excursions, then a push into private corporate charters. Each idea made sense on its own. Together, they left his guides unsure what mattered. The kayak guides had no idea whether the program was the future or a side project. The boat captain bought new equipment for corporate charters a month before Phil decided the margins weren’t there. His best guide finally asked him at the end of a long day, “What are we trying to be?” Phil didn’t have an answer.

Nadia is director of operations for a group of four neighborhood restaurants. When she started, she wrote the group’s vision on a single line: “The place your neighborhood celebrates in.” Every decision that followed got held up against it.

She sat down with each restaurant’s general manager and asked them to list everything they did and hold each item up against that line. One manager’s list showed that the weekday lunch buffet served office workers from across town, not the neighborhood, and it lost money. They cut it. When the group’s owners proposed a fifth location by the airport, Nadia ran it against the vision and recommended against it, then helped them redirect the money into private dining rooms at two of the current restaurants. She took the owners’ growth targets and built them into a plan the managers could see themselves in.

THE BLIND SPOT

A vision repeated once at a kickoff meeting is forgotten by the next quarter, and a vision that changes every few months stops being a vision at all. The other trap is treating strategy as a list of good ideas. Strategy is as much about what you say no to as what you say yes to, and the hardest no is to an idea that's good but doesn't fit.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Write it in one line, with your team.** If your vision doesn't fit in a sentence, keep working on it, and ask the people who will live it what they'd add.
- **Start with where you are.** Name the biggest challenge in your way, choose how you'll meet it, then check that the things you plan to do support each other.
- **Build it into the routine.** Open meetings with it, bring it into one-on-ones, and name it when you turn down a good idea that doesn't fit.
- **Help each person find their line.** Show every team member how their work connects to the destination.
- **Test new ideas against it.** Ask whether each opportunity moves you toward the vision or just looks attractive.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Look at the major decisions you've made over the past year. Did they all point in the same direction? If someone on your team listed them, would they be able to guess your vision?

Apply. This week, write your vision in a single sentence. Ask three people on your team to describe it in their own words, and compare the answers.

Notice. Listen for the question "Why are we doing this?" Each time you hear it, the connection between the work and the vision has broken

somewhere.

Setting Goals & Expectations

At that same South Florida condo hotel, I spent time on something far less glamorous than writing a vision: figuring out what we were being measured on. Ownership wanted growth in condominium sales. Corporate wanted stronger sales results. The brand team saw guest satisfaction as our biggest opportunity. Department heads wanted resources for their own areas, and employees wanted to know what we expected of them. Every request was reasonable. Together, they pulled the hotel in several directions at once.

I gathered every number I could find: occupancy and rate, department profit and loss statements, labor costs, satisfaction and cleanliness scores, even the raw guest comment cards. Then I pulled my leadership team into a work session and laid the data beside everything I'd heard. We worked through it department by department and built the goals for each area together. I took the draft to corporate and ownership, we made a few adjustments, and we landed on goals everyone agreed were achievable and a real stretch.

Then we made sure the whole team knew them. We posted the goals in the back of house and updated everyone weekly on how we were tracking. Every meeting opened with them, and so did every pre-shift.

By the end of that first year, the team had grown revenue by more than \$5 million, and guest satisfaction hit the highest level the hotel had ever recorded.

SETTING GOALS & EXPECTATIONS

Once the strategy is set, the work turns to execution. The first step is aligning people and resources with the priorities. The next is turning the strategy into a plan of specific actions. One durable format is the S.M.A.R.T. goal. In a common version, the letters stand for specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and time-bound. Each line of the plan names what will be done, how success will be measured, and by when.

Two things make a plan work. First, the people who will do the work help build it. People support what they help create, and they spot problems the leader can't see. Second, every person knows both the organization's goals and the specific expectations of their own role. Clear expectations create accountability, and they're what make it fair. A person can't be held to a standard no one told them about, and a leader who sets expectations clearly can address a miss without it feeling like a surprise. Goals should be about results, and the plan should flex when the business changes.

Clear goals do more than organize the work. They keep people motivated and confident, because everyone understands the objective. They help people focus on priorities, and they give everyone a way to make decisions on their own: does this move us toward the goal or not? Specific, stretching goals work better than a vague "do your best." Role expectations then turn the organization's goals into something personal. When each person knows what success looks like in their own job, the leader has a fair baseline for feedback, and the person can see where they're excelling and where they need to grow.

Keep the list short, too. A team with three goals can remember them and act on them. A team with fifteen has none. And watch what a goal might push people to give up. A target for faster check-in can turn into rushed, cold check-ins if no one is also watching how guests feel. Pair each goal with the measure you don't want it to cost.

Courtney is the district manager for six cafés, and her goal for the quarter is to improve speed of service. She announces it on a conference call with all six managers, and everyone agrees it's important.

At the end of the quarter, she visits each café. One manager added a second register. One cut three items from the menu. One retrained the baristas on milk steaming. One did nothing, because his café already felt fast. Two tracked wait times; four didn't. Nobody can say whether service is any faster, because no one agreed on what "faster" meant or how to measure it.

Ben is director of operations at a beachfront resort, and in January his team builds the year's plan together. Each goal supports one of the resort's top priorities for the year and gets written as one line: what, how it will be measured, who owns it, and by when. "Cut average poolside food delivery from twenty-five minutes to fifteen by Labor Day, measured by ticket times. Lead: Alicia." Every department head owns lines. Every month, each of them reports out in five minutes or less: green, yellow, or red, and what they need.

In late August, a hurricane closes the pool deck for six weeks. Ben doesn't throw out the plan. He calls the team together, and they rewrite four lines in an afternoon. The poolside service goal shifts to the beach, with the same owner and measure and a new date.

THE BLIND SPOT

A goal that's clear to you isn't automatically clear to everyone. "Improve guest satisfaction" or "be more efficient" can mean ten different things to ten different people, and each will work hard on their own version. Writing the plan alone and handing it down causes a different problem. A

plan the team didn't help build is one they'll treat as yours, and when it falls behind, they'll wait for you to fix it.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Write a few goals, each as one clear line.** What, how measured, who owns it, by when. Make it specific and a stretch, and pair it with the measure you don't want it to cost.
- **Build the plan with the team.** Invite the people doing the work to write the lines they will own.
- **Spell out role expectations.** Make sure each person knows exactly what success looks like in their own job.
- **Track what drives the result.** Results arrive late. Also track the few weekly actions that produce them, so you can correct course before the quarter is over.
- **Revise instead of abandoning.** Monthly or quarterly, short, with a simple status and what's needed. When the business changes, update the plan together rather than letting it fade.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Take the last goal you set that didn't land. Could every person involved have told you, in the same words, what success looked like and how it would be measured? If not, where did the gap start?

Apply. This week, rewrite one current goal as a single line with a measure, an owner, and a date. Then check that the owner agrees with every word.

Notice. The phrase "I thought you meant..." is the sign. Each time you hear it, an expectation was never made clear.

Leading Change

A luxury hotel in Washington, DC, was sold and changed brands overnight. I was part of the task force sent in from the new brand. On the first morning, employees arrived to a new name on the door and a lot of questions nobody could fully answer yet: Would their jobs stay? Would their hourly pay rate and preferred days off change? What did the new brand expect? Our job was to help them stay motivated, teach them the new brand, and be honest about what we didn't know yet.

We started by saying out loud what was changing and what wasn't. The name, the standards, and the systems were changing. The people who knew this hotel's guests weren't. We also said we would tell them what we knew, what we didn't, and when they'd hear more. We wouldn't guess.

The team had built something good. Many of them had worked there for years, and some knew regular guests by name and by their favorite table. We said so, and we asked for their help. We asked a few of the longest-serving employees, including a concierge who'd been there for most of two decades, to help us decide which of the hotel's own traditions should carry over into the new brand.

We took it one department at a time, with a short training each morning, so no one felt buried. The first week was messy. Some of the new standards didn't fit how the building worked day to day, and we adjusted them with the team. We changed the approach more than once, but never the commitment, and we stopped by every department each day to share what we knew, even when it was "no news yet."

On my last day, the concierge pulled me aside. He told me the first week had been the hardest of his career, but that he had always known where he stood. He'd taught a teammate how to greet a guest the new way, in his own words.

LEADING CHANGE

Hospitality never holds still. Every leader will lead a change, often several at once, whether it's new owners, a new brand, new systems, a renovation, or a new way of scheduling or hiring. Leading it well means bringing people through it from start to finish. People rarely resist the new thing itself. They resist what they lose: a routine they've mastered, a title or a corner office, a relationship with a regular guest, the feeling of being good at their job. Confusion can look like resistance too. When people don't know what to do differently on Monday, they keep doing what they did last week.

Leaders who are good at change start with why now. They share the evidence in plain terms, the guest comments, the numbers, the competitor down the street, before they describe the plan. They name what's ending and what isn't, and they honor the old way rather than criticizing it, because it was right for its time and the people in the room built it. They bring in the people closest to the work, including the loudest skeptic and the respected peers others will watch, to shape how the change happens. And they start small, with a pilot, a first step everyone can see, and a first win worth talking about.

Then they keep the information flowing. The senior leader explains the business reason, and each person's own manager explains what it means for them and their team. They say it in meetings and in one-on-ones, and they make sure their own decisions match the message. They expect a messy middle, when the old way is gone and the new way isn't comfortable yet, and performance can dip before it improves. A good leader stays visible through that stretch, changes the approach when something isn't working, and holds firm on the commitment.

Good change leaders also make sure people have the skills for the new way, with training and time to practice, because knowing what to do isn't the same as being able to do it. And they reinforce it. They thank the people who adopt it early, and they change the checklists, schedules, and rewards that still point to the old way. A change is finished when the new way is simply how things are done.

Gordon is the general manager of a resort. Weekend bookings are down by a third, and the owners have approved two changes: converting two of the least-used tennis courts to pickleball, and turning the formal dining room into a casual family restaurant on weeknights.

Gordon announces both in a Friday afternoon email to his department heads. He doesn't mention the bookings. The tennis pro learns about the courts from the survey stakes along the baseline. The dining room servers hear about the new restaurant from returning guests before Gordon tells them. Within two weeks, two of his best servers have given notice, the tennis pro is telling regulars the whole thing is a mistake, and the owners are asking Gordon why the plan has stalled.

Sarah leads program design at a destination management company that builds incentive trips for corporate clients: top salespeople and their partners, flown somewhere beautiful as a reward. For years, every trip followed the same shape: a full schedule, the whole group together, and a formal dinner every night.

The surveys had been saying for two seasons that award winners wanted more choice and more free time, and two longtime clients had put their next trips out to bid. Sarah decided to move to flexible programming. She also knew who stood to lose the most. Her most senior designer had built those nightly dinners for fifteen years and kept every seating chart in a binder on his shelf. Then she sent the plan to the whole team in a Friday email, before she had talked to him. He read it on his phone at his daughter's soccer game.

On Monday morning she was in his office first. She told him she'd gotten the order wrong, and she asked him to help design the pilot. At the team meeting that week, she put the survey comments and the two bids on the screen. She said what was ending, a formal dinner every night, and what was not: the closing-night gala would stay, and it would stay his. They tested the new format with one client, twenty guests over three days. Two of the afternoon options flopped, and they said so. The rest became the highest-rated part of the trip. Every Friday she sent a short update, even when there was nothing new. This spring, her senior designer started a second binder.

THE BLIND SPOT

When people push back on a change, the natural response is to explain it again: more slowly, with more slides. But understanding is rarely the problem. Most people understand perfectly well what the change is. What they haven't heard is why now, what they're losing, and whether anyone noticed. Leaders also treat the announcement as the finish line. The real work happens in the weeks and months after it, when the old habits are still strong and the new ones aren't comfortable yet.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Start with why now.** Before you share the plan, share the reason, using the evidence people can see for themselves.

- **Name what's ending and what isn't.** Say what people will lose, honor the way things were done before, and be clear about what stays the same.
- **Bring in the people most affected, early.** Include your strongest skeptic and the respected peers others will watch. Let them shape how the change happens, even if they can't change whether it happens.
- **Make the first step small and visible.** Pilot it, celebrate the first win, and make it clear what each person should do differently on day one.
- **Build the skill, then reinforce it.** Give people training and time to practice, thank the early adopters, and update the checklists and rewards that still point to the old way.
- **Keep the updates coming.** Use every channel, send an update even when nothing is new, and make sure each manager can explain what it means for their own team.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Look back at the last few changes you led. Which ones stuck, and which ones faded? For the ones that faded, who had the most to lose, and did anyone ever say it out loud?

Apply. Choose a change you're leading now or will lead soon. Write down what will be hardest for people and what isn't changing, and share both with your team this week.

Notice. Listen for "Nobody asked us." Each time you hear it, a change was done to people instead of with them.

Innovation & Continuous Improvement

Before I ever became a general manager, I spent a year as the director of Six Sigma at a large convention hotel. Six Sigma is a way of improving a process by measuring where it goes wrong and fixing the cause rather than the symptom. My job was to find those causes and help the teams fix them.

One of the first processes I took on was the banquet event order, known in hotels as the BEO. Every meeting, wedding, and gala has one. It holds the instructions for the event: the room and how it's set, the guest count, the menu and every dietary request, the timing, the audiovisual needs, and the bar. The event planner builds it with the client, and copies go to every team that brings it to life: culinary, the stewards who pull the china, glass, and silver, the banquet setup crew, the servers, audiovisual, engineering, and accounting, who bill from it.

The hotel I worked at had hundreds of events each month, so small errors added up. A room was set for 300 when the guarantee was 340. A vegetarian meal never made it onto the kitchen's list. A coffee break was set out at the wrong time.

The data pointed us in one direction: most of the errors happened at events whose details had changed in the final week. But the numbers couldn't tell us why. So I spent time with every group that touched a BEO. I sat with the event planners while they took clients' calls. I stood in the kitchen while the banquet chef planned the prep. I worked a shift with

the stewards and walked rooms with the setup crew before dawn.

On one of those mornings, a member of the setup crew pulled three copies of the same BEO off the board in the back hallway. All three were for the same luncheon, printed on different days. “Which one do I set?” he asked me. “I usually go with the one on top.”

That was the answer the data couldn’t give us. Every change created a new version, but nobody took down the old ones.

The first fix we designed together was simple. Every revision got a version number and a date in the top corner, with the changes circled, and whoever posted a new BEO took down the old one. We tried it in one ballroom for a month and tracked every error.

It was the first of many small changes. Once each team saw their ideas being used, more of them came in. The kitchen asked for dietary requests to be listed on a line of their own. The stewards asked for the guarantee count at the top of every page. Each week, someone from every team met to look at what had gone wrong and why, and most of those meetings ended with another small fix. One by one, we rolled them out across the hotel.

By the end of the year, errors on our BEOs had dropped by more than half. Around the same time, a client who brought her association’s conference to the hotel every year called her event planner after the closing dinner. She said it was the smoothest one yet.

INNOVATION & CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Great leaders are never quite finished. They work on two things at once: making what they already do a little better every week, and keeping watch for what’s coming next, so the business is ready before it has to be. The first is continuous improvement. The second is innovation. Both depend on the same habit, a steady curiosity about whether there’s a better way.

The people closest to the work see the most opportunities to improve it. Leaders tap into that by giving everyone a simple way to suggest ideas and by acting on them quickly. How a leader responds matters more than

how many ideas come in. A quick yes to a small idea, or an honest “not now, and here’s why,” teaches people their input counts. When a problem shows up, look past the symptom to the cause. Asking “why” several times in a row often gets you there. Then try the fix small, check whether it worked, and either adopt it or adjust it. Small improvements, made week after week, turn a team into a very different one within a year. And when a standard becomes easy, raise it.

Innovation takes the same habits and points them outward. Leaders who innovate well follow the competition, the wider market, and the customers who will matter five years from now, not only the ones walking in today. They also watch today’s guests closely: where they hesitate, what they work around, and what they ask for that no one offers. Those small frustrations are often where the next idea starts. They read outside their own industry, because good ideas often come from somewhere else, and they pay attention to small newcomers that look too odd to matter, until suddenly they do. Rather than betting on a single forecast, they picture two or three ways the future could unfold and ask what they would do in each.

Then they test new ideas the way they test any fix: small, fast, and on purpose. A well-designed test that doesn’t work still teaches you something. The failures worth worrying about are the preventable ones. None of this happens in the time left over. Protect a little time and budget for it, or the urgent will always win.

Stacy is the general manager of a family entertainment center with bowling, laser tag, and an arcade. Twice a year, she launches a major improvement initiative. There was the guest experience overhaul with a consultant, the new operations manual, and the “Excellence Month” with banners in the break room.

Each one starts with energy and fades within six weeks. Meanwhile, the suggestion box by the time clock has been locked for two years, because no one can find the key. Her party hosts know exactly why birthday parties keep running late: the pizza order goes in when the guests arrive instead of thirty minutes before. They've mentioned it in passing more than once. No one has written it down, because nothing ever happens to what gets written down.

Hector runs operations at an event venue that hosts weddings, galas, and corporate dinners, about a hundred and fifty a year. A whiteboard hangs in the back hallway, and after every event, anyone on the crew can note what slowed them down that night. Hector reads it before he leaves, every time.

He sorts the answers into three columns: fix this week, fix this month, and think about. The fixes are mostly small. A dishwasher pointed out that the clean glass racks were staged at the far end of the kitchen, so the bar backs were crossing the busiest path to get them. They moved the racks fifteen feet. Hector keeps a running count of fixes at the top of the board, and last year it passed three hundred. The think-about column was another story. By spring it held dozens of ideas, and nobody had touched one in months. When a new server asked what happened to them, Hector had to admit he didn't know. Now, on the first Monday of every month, he picks one and tests it at a single event. Most go back on the board. In June, a bartender's idea to batch the couple's signature cocktail before the doors open cut the first-hour line at the bar in half, and it's now part of every wedding.

THE BLIND SPOT

Innovation gets pictured as a big, expensive bet, and improvement as an event: a launch, a retreat, a month with banners. Since big bets are risky and events fade, both end up happening a couple of times a year and teaching people that improvement is something done to them. Most useful progress is small and cheap, like a fix suggested at the end of a shift, a test with twenty guests, an idea borrowed from another industry. It's also easy to look for ideas only inside your own walls and your own industry. By the time a trend shows up in your industry's magazines, your competitors have seen it too.

BUILDING THE SKILL

- **Ask after every shift, and act within a week.** Build a short, regular moment for people to say what got in their way. Do something with every suggestion within a week, even if the answer is “not now, and here's why.”
- **Go see the work.** Problems look different where the work happens than in a report. Ask “why” until you reach the root.
- **Watch your guests.** Spend an hour where guests are, and note every place they hesitate, wait, or work around something.
- **Test small.** Try new ideas on a small scale, on a short timeline. Share what didn't work and what you learned.
- **Look beyond your walls.** Set aside time each month for ideas from industries unlike yours, and get to know the people who will be your customers in five years. Once a year, sketch two or three ways your market could change and what you'd do in each.
- **Keep score, and raise the bar.** Track the number of improvements and share the count with the team. When a standard becomes easy, set a new one.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

Reflect. Count the ideas your team brought you over the past year. Which did you act on, which did you test, and which did you turn down? How many of the reasons came down to “that’s not how we do it”?

Apply. Pick one suggestion your team made in the past month that nothing has happened to. Act on it, test it, or tell the person why not.

Notice. Watch what happens to a suggestion after someone makes it. If the answer is nothing, your team has noticed too.

CLOSING

Just Do the Next Thing

You've now read about eighteen skills. If you're like most readers, some of them landed harder than others. A few probably described you on a good day, and a few probably described you on a bad one. Both are useful.

Part One was about leading yourself: *self-awareness, relationships, optimism, communication, organization, and wellness*. People decide whether to follow you long before they judge anything you say, and these six skills shape that decision. None of them needs a title or a team. All of them can start today.

Part Two was about leading others: *servant leadership, belonging, developing others, giving feedback, listening and asking questions, and motivation and inspiration*. This is where the job shifts from what you can do to what you can bring out of other people. It's also where your habits matter most, because the people you lead will copy them.

Part Three was about leading the business: *creating the culture, business acumen and decision-making, vision and strategy, setting goals and expectations, leading change, and innovation and continuous improvement*. The choices here reach people you may never meet, and they all come back to the same two questions: what is it like to work here, and what is it like to be a guest here?

Look back at the stories in these chapters, mine and the ones in the boxes. Almost none of them happened on a stage. They happened at a front desk, in a conference room, in a hallway at two in the morning, by a truck at the end of a long night. Leadership is built in ordinary moments

like those, one at a time. And nobody in these pages did it perfectly. The leaders who were good at it noticed when they slipped, and they adjusted.

The skills are different, but the pattern behind them is the same. Notice what's happening. Be honest about your part in it. Do one small thing differently. Then do it again.

THE TROUBLE WITH FINISHING A BOOK

Here's where many good intentions go to rest. You close the cover feeling motivated, and by Friday the sand has filled the jar again. The inbox is full, a manager calls out sick, a guest needs you, and the eighteen skills go back on the shelf with the book. It happens to everyone, because life moves faster than any plan.

Eighteen skills is a lot to carry into a busy week. Trying to carry all of them is the surest way to carry none.

So pick one.

HOW TO CHOOSE

If you're not sure where to start, here are three ways to choose.

Go back to the chapter where a Reflect question made you uncomfortable. That small sting is usually a sign you found something worth working on.

Or find the chapter where you recognized yourself in the person who lacks the skill. Most of us saw ourselves in at least one of them. That's a good place to start.

Or ask someone you trust which of the eighteen they would most like to see you work on, and listen to the whole answer before you say anything. You may be surprised by what they choose, and that surprise is the point.

Once you've chosen, do the Apply step at the end of that chapter this week. Only that one. Write it down. Put it on your calendar. Tell one person you're working on it, so someone else notices when you do it.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Some people do seem to be born leaders. But leadership can also be learned. It comes from a few clear beliefs, intentions, and habits, practiced long enough to become a discipline.

The first few times will feel awkward. Asking for feedback, holding the silence in a meeting, or naming what's ending during a change can all feel unnatural at first. That's normal. A new habit always feels less comfortable than the old one, even when the old way wasn't working.

You'll also slip. You'll interrupt someone, skip the check-in, or answer a question you meant to ask. When that happens, notice it, own it, and start again the next day. The leaders people trust most aren't the ones who never slip. They're the ones who say, "I missed that one," and keep going.

And you'll start to see small signs that it's working. Someone brings you a problem sooner than they used to. A quiet person speaks up in a meeting. A new hire asks a question they would have kept to themselves a month ago. Those moments are easy to miss, so watch for them.

COME BACK TO IT

This book follows the order leadership is usually built in, from leading yourself to leading others to leading the business. You won't need every chapter at every stage. If you're early in your career, Part One will matter most right now. If you just became a manager, Part Two will feel like it was written for this year. If you're responsible for a whole operation, Part Three will speak loudest, and Part One will remind you of habits you may have stopped examining.

Keep it nearby. Come back to it when your role changes, when a team struggles, or when something isn't working and you can't say why. A chapter that didn't land today may be exactly the one you need next year.

JUST DO THE NEXT THING

This is the idea that has carried me through my own career, and I'll leave it with you. *Just Do the Next Thing.*

You don't need a plan for your whole career. You don't need to master all eighteen skills before you're allowed to lead. You need to know what the next thing is, and then you need to do it. Once it's done, the next one is usually easier to see. Slow and steady wins here.

Great leadership at every level is what makes great hospitality possible, and it's earned one interaction at a time. Your next one is probably today.

One question is worth carrying with you long after you put this book down: would the people you lead say they're proud to work for you? Every small step you take brings that answer closer to yes. Just do the next thing.

I'm cheering for you.

The 18 Skills at a Glance

PART ONE: LEADING YOURSELF

SKILL	WATCH FOR	TRY THIS WEEK
1. Self-awareness	Assuming you see yourself the way others do	Ask someone you trust what you might not see about how you come across, and hear the whole answer
2. Relationships	Going through channels instead of through people	Talk with someone on another team, with no request attached
3. Optimism	Assuming a setback means it will never work	Name one thing that gives you reason for hope about a challenge you're facing, and share it with your team
4. Communication	Focusing on what you said, not what they heard	Adjust your pace, detail, or opening with someone whose style differs from yours
5. Organization	Mistaking busy for organized	Write down the three things that would make this week a success, and schedule them first
6. Wellness	Taking care of everyone but yourself	Do the minimum version of one priority every day for seven days

PART TWO: LEADING OTHERS

SKILL	WATCH FOR	TRY THIS WEEK
7. Servant leadership	Expecting the team to work for you, instead of you working for them	Ask each person what's in their way, and fix one answer
8. Belonging	Overlooking the quiet people on the edges	Ask the newest person for their view first, and hold the silence

SKILL	WATCH FOR	TRY THIS WEEK
9. Developing others	Believing it's faster to do it yourself	Hand one hard task to someone, then step back
10. Giving feedback	Softening it until it can't be understood	Have the conversation you've put off, in under five minutes
11. Listening & asking questions	Doing most of the talking	Ask one open question and say nothing until the answer ends
12. Motivation & inspiration	Letting rewards do the work of purpose	Share one guest compliment with the person or teams who earned it

PART THREE: LEADING THE BUSINESS

SKILL	WATCH FOR	TRY THIS WEEK
13. Creating the culture	Tolerating behavior that contradicts your values	Ask three employees what it's like to work here, and act on one answer
14. Business acumen & decision-making	Leaving the numbers to finance, or waiting for certainty	For one decision, write how easy it is to undo, who decides, and by when
15. Vision & strategy	Leaving your vision too vague, or changing it too often	Write your vision in one sentence and ask three people to say it back
16. Setting goals & expectations	Thinking a goal that's clear to you is clear to everyone	Rewrite one goal with a measure, an owner, and a date
17. Leading change	Announcing a change instead of leading people through it	Share what's changing and what isn't, and invite questions
18. Innovation & continuous improvement	Treating improvement as an event	Act on, test, or answer one suggestion that's been sitting

Notes

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*Thank you for reading **Leading Hospitality: 18 Leadership Skills for Becoming a Hotel General Manager**. Best of luck to you on your leadership journey.*

*For more leadership tips, please visit my website at:
MarylouiseFitzgibbon.com*



Great leadership at every level is what makes great hospitality possible.

With more than thirty years of hospitality experience, Marylouise Fitzgibbon has led a variety of hotels and resorts from midscale to luxury as both a property general manager and a regional general manager. She has been personally featured in over a dozen articles about the hotel industry, including *USA Today* and *The New York Times*, and was chosen by the American Hotel & Lodging Association as its General Manager of the Year, an award that spans all hotel companies in the United States.



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