

Of Angels and Tigers

In the drive to become increasingly global, Shangri-La provides the perfect atmosphere for learning opportunities.

Shangri-La Hotels & Resorts have ambitious plans: to grow by 100 percent in the next five years, doubling their 55 hotels to 110 and extending their reach from Asia into the Western hemisphere, all while maintaining their unique culture of caring and hospitality.

Employee learning and development plays an integral role in the corporation, which states its HR mission as, “enabling all employees to achieve their personal and professional growth.”

“It all begins with that mission: to be a first-choice employer among hospitality workers,” explains Eng Leong Tan, group director for human resources. “We are committed to providing an environment in which employees can learn and grow. It is not enough just to pay well and offer

good benefits. Growth opportunities are equally important, especially to younger employees.”

Shangri-La backs this mission with a financial commitment: to spend 4 percent of payroll on training and development in hotels in China, and 3 percent of payroll in hotels in other countries. This has been a corporate directive for seven years.

Tan reports to the company chairman and has responsibility for enterprisewide learning for 35,000 employees. One hundred percent of the company’s general managers and above include learning objectives as part of their performance goals, and Shangri-La’s CEO has been quoted as saying, “I love to develop people and see them achieve their professional goals.”

The hotel industry is all about differentiating your properties from those of your competitors, usually with a combination of amenities—cushy mattresses, steam showers, high-tech capability—and corporate culture, manifested in hospitality and customer service.

At Shangri-La, this is branded as “Shangri-La Hospitality from Caring

People.” As preparation for its explosive growth spurt, the company recently rolled out a revamped core training program to all 35,000 employees, tailoring it to appeal to a younger, more culturally diverse audience of Generation Y employees.

A multicultural, multiregion taskforce generated fresh ideas for course content and collateral. The old instructor-led delivery was scrapped in favor of an experiential learning environment that includes interactive group exercises and role play. A series of animated videos illustrates customer interaction scenarios and demonstrates cultural challenges.

Training delivery itself was cascaded down through the organization, beginning with hotel general managers, and pursuing a train-the-trainer strategy to prepare master trainers and departmental trainers. (This is a common approach for Shangri-La, which employs only four learning and development professionals at the corporate level; the remaining 180 are stationed within the properties and often play dual roles.) Employees, at any level and in any role, who are seen actively

L-R: Eng Leong Tan, Group Director
of Human Resources; Eng Hwee Ong,
Director of Corporate Training



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Group Director for
Human Resources, Shangri-La
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exhibiting desired behaviors can be christened as “angels,” and serve as exemplars for their counterparts.

The company’s first North American property is scheduled to open in Vancouver in January 2009, but human resource planning for the expansion began at least three years ago, with the launch of the North American Tigers Program in February 2006. Talented young hospitality professionals from North America were placed in Shangri-La properties throughout Asia.

They were to observe, and absorb the service culture, take part in service delivery within their host hotels, and ultimately bring that expertise back to Shangri-La’s North American properties currently under development.

While in Asia, Tigers also complete the “Shangri-La Cares” training program. To date, 15 Tigers have been placed in positions at 18 Shangri-La properties in Asia for stints from two months to two-and-a-half years. Their roles have varied from guest relations manager to sous-chef to assistant director of food and beverage.

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All Shangri-La employees receive annual performance reviews, and 80 percent have individual development

plans. For those employees who are designated as high-potentials and are nominated by their general managers, the Advanced Hospitality Management Program in Hotel Management awaits.

This is a 10-week, full-time residential development program at Shangri-La’s corporate academy in Beijing, China, which boasts 27 full-time learning and development staff members. In addition, any interested manager can apply to pursue one of three other leadership development platforms: an 18-month on-the-job training program, a self-paced leadership development program, or the eCornell program in hospitality management.

“We developed this matrixed program, featuring different platforms and different channels, out of the recognition that executives from varied cultural backgrounds and generations have varied learning modes,” says Eng Hwee Ong, director of corporate training. “Some may learn more effectively in an intensive classroom environment; others may prefer self-study at their own pace. We also recognized that these executives are at different stages of their professional development.”

All program participants are mentored and supported by the general manager or resident manager of their hotel, and are assigned action-learning projects to complete. These projects must tackle real business issues Shangri-La is facing, and are presented to the senior managers of the company during its annual meeting in Hong Kong.

To ensure sustainability, to inform its succession-planning practices, and to fill its leadership pipeline, Shangri-La has developed the PASS process, the ultimate result of which will be a database of individual skills that can be compared to organizational needs. PASS (Prepare, Accountability, Support, celebrate Success) represents a process in which managers and employees jointly complete a form that tracks employee training goals and progress.

About 60 percent of employees currently have documentation of individual competencies; most of these are in the key areas of leadership, management, supervision, and

technical skills. Training initiatives are planned on the corporate, regional, hotel, and individual levels. Training and development activities are linked to business needs and defined objectives, and are usually implemented by a pool of certified in-house trainers.

In its desire to be an employer of choice, Shangri-La views employee satisfaction as an important metric by which to measure performance. Every 24 months, an independent staff opinion survey is administered by an external research organization. Since 2005, the company has made an intentional effort to boost the utilization of its training budgets; its most recent survey indicated a 6 percent increase in employee satisfaction over prior results.

Specific to training and development, there was a 3 percent increase in the number of employees who agreed that Shangri-La provides opportunities for career advancement and does a good job in promoting the most competent people. This places Shangri-La with other global, high-performance companies in the area of training and development, according to Towers Perrin. **T+D**



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