

Guttman Insights

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Aimbridge Hospitality is a leading global hospitality company offering best-in-class hotel-management services across a broad spectrum of hotels, destination resorts, and lifestyle and independent properties.

Aimbridge Hospitality's premium portfolio represents over 1,500 properties in 17 countries, with a global team of nearly 55,000 associates.

Ann Christenson is Aimbridge's CHRO.



Aimbridge

In this issue, Ann Christenson, CHRO Aimbridge Hospitality, shares insights gained from managing the HR function in an industry slammed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Howard M. Guttman asks us to consider organizations as “ecologies of players,” which then provides unique insights into differentiated, rather than “one-size-fits-all” human resource management. Underperformance is often self-imposed, a function of “core limiting beliefs.” Howard’s video, “Shifting Mindsets: What, Why, How,” offers a quick, effective fix.

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Leader's Corner: Ann Christenson, Aimbridge Hospitality High-Performance and Hospitality: Winning Combination

As you look at the rest of 2023 and beyond, what HR issues keep you up at night?

The challenging labor market is at the forefront. The hospitality industry still faces over one million open positions, so the war for talent is real! Attracting and retaining the most talented people, who are passionate about service, is critical for us, as is ensuring the continued growth and sense of belonging of our people as they work to create memorable experiences for our customers.

Are you responsible for staffing within your portfolio of 1,500 properties?

The general manager and leadership team of each property do the hiring. We provide the tools, technology platforms, resources, collateral, and advertising. We also have market recruiters who help fill hourly hotel positions, especially in tight labor markets.

What are the core "Aimbridge Way" values, and how do you make them stick?

The Aimbridge Way is our common language. It is our commitment to our associates: how we treat each other, what we commit to and deliver to our associates, and what we expect of them. It is not just what we do, but the way we are transforming how we work. As a high-growth, performance-based organization, our culture has evolved since the pandemic. We're investing in the employee experience and have set out on a journey to create a vision and mission, and the Aimbridge Way pillars, which are aligned with our values, as a place to grow, succeed, and belong—along with the actions that support them.

So, what are the vision and values?

At Aimbridge Hospitality, we are creating the world's new standard in hospitality. That's the vision! We consider Aimbridge as the land of opportunities, where potential meets possible, and where associates can thrive and grow their careers. Our four values are: "Think We. Not Me"; "Be Inclusive. Be Respectful. Be Curious"; "Become Better. Every Day"; and "Think Like a Guest. Act Like an Owner."

Give me an example of an action that you've taken to drive home these values?

I am passionate about providing people with the opportunity to advance and grow. We've created a leadership academy, which provides a significant learning opportunity for our current managers and the next generation of leaders. My job is to advocate on behalf of my colleagues: to provide them with opportunities to apply the newly acquired skills to new challenges and advance their careers. It gets me up every day!

Let's say you're speaking before a group of CEOs and addressing the topic of optimizing talent. What one thing would you recommend?

The number-one spectator sport at work is boss-watching. How we as leaders conduct ourselves, lead, and engage with one another—all our behaviors are under close review. You have to lead by example, exhibit the behaviors that induce trust, and role model high-performance ways of working.

What would you suggest a senior HR professional intent on amping up their game do to earn a seat at the top-team table?

Don't think about earning it. You must approach it with the mindset that you already have what it takes. Just assume the seat is yours. Don't act out or demand it. Perform. Your colleagues will notice that you're an A-list player, whether or not you have positional authority. My first job straight out of college, at 23 years of age, was as an HR director. There was one director who wasn't about to take advice from a kid. I went about building relationships with other people, getting things done. Soon, that director and others noticed that I could deliver results. Think like you have it, and act like you do.

Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion—Are they important for Aimbridge, and, if so, how do you measure them?

The hospitality industry is very diverse, so it's an important focus for us. We have many ERGs [Employee Resource Groups], such as A.W.E. [Aimbridge Women Excelling]. Our workforce is highly diverse, from the top down. These groups are not about talk, but programming, education, information sharing, mentoring, and the like. They provide opportunities to learn from one another, grow, and advance.

What's your take on organization change?

Our chairman likes to say, "Divided together, united apart." Bringing together two companies with different cultures, as we have done, requires significant change. You must remain focused on and stay true to the guiding principles and values of your organization. Don't succumb to the "We've always done it that way" noise; stay laser-focused on where you're going. Try to move with people, listen, be empathetic, and explain the why. Be willing to be influenced, but also remain true to the path you need to travel.

And, speaking of change, what issues led you to retain GDS?

We have been on a significant growth journey through acquisitions and a merger. We had a transformation at the top of Aimbridge. We were a new team, with a new CEO and team members. The challenge before us was how to rapidly accelerate our effectiveness to become a high-performing, high-functioning leadership team.

What have you done to date on your high-performance journey?

We have been through several alignments, skills training, and coaching. In addition, GDS has facilitated several senior-team and HR-team meetings. We also cascaded through the organization HPT norms and ways of working. We've been working with GDS to train the HR team to transfer key HPT skills and tools down through Aimbridge. But it all starts with the members of the senior team—how they lead, assert, listen, manage conflict, address issues, structure their meetings, and embed HPT ways of working into their respective organizations. They must believe in HPT, exhibit HPT behaviors, and call colleagues out when those behaviors don't align with the HPT framework.

What's been the ROI of your GDS HPT journey?

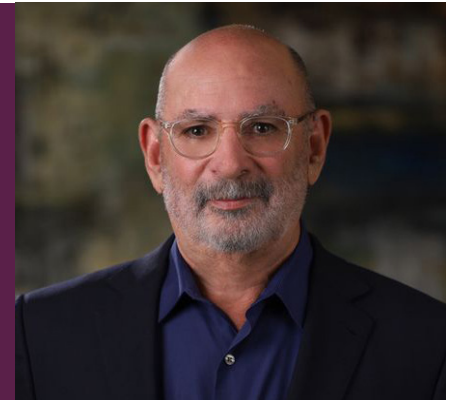
It would have taken us a full year to get where we got in the two days of that first alignment! Everything was fresh, and we had two members start with us the week before our first alignment session. You learn things about yourself and one another. You make agreements on ways of working and commitments to one another. You have candid conversations about what you need from one another and what is needed to support the business. Doing this just as the team was forming gave us a foundation on which to build the HPT model. No question, the HPT approach rapidly accelerated our coming together as a new senior team.

Would you recommend GDS to your fellow CHROs?

Absolutely! I love the GDS's down-to-earth, non-theoretical, no-BS approach to organization development and change. GDS has been a great partner, resource, and ally in helping to move our organization forward. GDS does real work that gets real results. 🌱

Managing Player Ecology

by Howard M. Guttman



Think of organizations as an ecology of players. Some are high-performance players. They “get” horizontal, high-performance values and consistently meet or exceed expectations. At the other end, some players are not aligned with the organization’s high-performance values or culture and consistently underdeliver. Then, there are other players between the two extremes.

The matrix below illustrates the four types of players that comprise the ecological player mix within organizations:

THE PLAYER MATRIX			
		DELIVERS RESULTS	
		+	-
IS ALIGNED WITH HIGH-PERFORMANCE VALUES	+	High performer	True believer/underachiever
	-	Toxic player	Dead wood

To be effective, leaders need to carefully assess their organization’s ecology, identify the mix of players, and develop strategies for managing that mix. Spoiler alert: One leadership style does not fit all!

High-performance players are the organization’s best and brightest. They are the future. Leaders need to inspire, empower, promote, and showcase such players as role models. Look for opportunities to delegate responsibility to them and send them a message that they are valued and trusted. Other than nurturing high-performance players, periodically checking in with them, and providing needed support, the best leadership strategy is turning these players loose and letting them excel.

At the other extreme are **Dead Wood**: players who are culturally unaligned and rarely, if ever, meet expectations. They are a drag on the organization’s vitality and success. Leaders need to also turn these players loose—but on some other organization. Termination is the best strategy for dealing with Dead Wood. And the sooner, the better!

Then, there are the **True Believers/Underachievers**. These players require a more nuanced leadership approach. They are aligned and subscribe to high-performance values but never seem to deliver expected results. They exemplify the organization’s values and deserve opportunities to prove that they have the right stuff. The first step in dealing with True Believers/Underachievers is to determine cause: What accounts for the sub-par performance? It could be a deficiency of skills, unclear goals, lack of support, a poor feedback system, supervision issues, or consequences that fail to prompt desired behavior. Whatever the root cause or causes, they must be carefully identified and addressed.

What You Permit, You Promote.

Leaders should analyze, coach, instruct, and possibly “reput” these players to a different position and then closely monitor their performance.

Toxic players. These are truly the gut wrenchers. Toxic players achieve great results but don’t exemplify the values of a high-performance organization. In one management consulting organization, the top sales person consistently closed six-figure client contracts but led a fifth column of disruptive activity. He was a charismatic figure who remained at odds with the company’s strategy and beliefs and tried to recruit others to his cause.

In another case, a VP of sales of a consumer goods company had deep relationships with the company’s major account, which represented upwards of 30 percent of the company’s revenue. Customers loved him, but not so the members of his team and others in his organization. His ham-fisted, Machiavellian approach turned everyone off. Leaders in the company initially looked the other way, feeling that they had no choice but to sell their souls to Satan in exchange for bottom-line performance. Eventually, the uproar within the organization simply became unbearable, and they finally pulled the plug on this toxic individual.

Terminating a star performer is one of the toughest challenges a leader can face. They have unique strengths but carry serious baggage. They burn bright, but their lack of transparency, siloed game playing, and being at stake solely for themselves will likely burn the leader’s and leadership team’s reputation and the organization’s performance.

Leaders who fail to move smartly to handle a toxic player risk being seen by their organizations as either unconscious, deliberately blind to what’s going on, or in collusion with the toxic player. And remember the truism: What you permit, you promote!

In today’s post-COVID organization, where the nature of organizational life and in-office culture are up for grabs, opportunities abound for the proliferation of resisters and toxic players.

Move deliberately to hold up a mirror to them so they can clearly see their reflected self and the consequence of their toxicity. But don’t count on behavior change from a toxic player: begin “lining up the ducks” to plan for their likely departure. ●

Shifting Mindsets: What, Why, How

by Howard M. Guttman

Remember the old Pogo cartoon line, “We have met the enemy and he is us”? It’s often true of human performance. Roadblocks from imperfect performance systems aside, the stories we tell ourselves can derail the way we show up and perform. Check out Howard’s video for a crash course in sweeping away the “core limiting beliefs” that hold us back. 🎧

