

Getting to the Top in Hospitality

by Allan Perales

CEO of Blink Hospitality

Becoming a general manager, or department head, in your organization can seem a lifetime away, but having a plan and recognizing four groups of characteristics that hiring managers review can not only set you apart from your peers, but also increase your chances of landing your dream job.

Planning your career usually happens with HR when you are already part of upper management, but why wait? You should develop your plan now. First, know that many ways to the top exist because there is no set path. Your unique strengths and capabilities define the best way to reach your career goals. Many people refer to growth as the movement along a corporate ladder. However at Deloitte, a large consulting firm here in Chicago and globally, they plan professional development on a corporate lattice, which allows for lateral movements. This reinforces the understanding that your path to the top will differ from other candidates. Second, as you create your plan, consider two main groups: yourself and your company. Take time to understand yourself as a person and a leader. Many books are available about understanding yourself. Also recognize the culture of your company, which can greatly influence decisions in your career plan. Third, take the time to really think about your career options. Ask yourself these questions:

- What jobs am I willing to do in the foreseeable future?
- How long should I stay in each role?
- How does each role prepare me to reaching my goal?
- Am I willing to change properties within my company?
- Who are the people that I need to impress to get that job?
- Who are the people that can help me become a better leader?

Generating a plan puts you ahead of your industry peers and relieves the stress of wondering about the next opportunity. And as you reach each new goal, reevaluate your plan. This is what I did for my career and also my business. As you figure out your career plan, realize that everyone is watching you: peers, customers, other department members, and your direct managers with HR. Your actions (and inactions) let people know what you represent in leadership and management. When its time for a promotion, people review four main groups of characteristics: experience, education, appearance, and strengths.

Experience: The key takeaway about experience is that you want it to be as diversified as possible, because it is an easy gauge for comparison between two candidates. Consider working across multiple departments. The number of years you spend in each department, and cumulatively, also influence your attractiveness. Finally, the number of rooms in your hotel speaks volumes about your experience. For instance, managing conference services for a 3000-room hotel with 40,000 square feet of meeting space is much different than the same role in a 122-room boutique hotel without meeting space. The more your experience is diversified, the better prepared you are for future roles. On a side note, you may want to consider working in both union and non-union hotels, suburban and downtown properties, or new construction and legendary buildings. Each offer unique advantages.

Education: Whether a certificate, associates, bachelors, or masters degree, it helps you stand out. I like to believe that the type of degree does not matter, because it really tells the hiring manager that you have the capacity to learn in a formal setting, but a business or hospitality degree may help you better than other concentrations. Interestingly, I believe a hiring manager is more likely to hire someone based on where you earned your degree, especially if you both share the same alma mater.

More important than earning a degree is actually being able to understand and apply business management concepts in your daily role. Too often students earn the high grades, but easily forget how to use their knowledge at work. Because business administration covers many topics from finance to human resources to marketing to operations, I believe that understanding accounting is the most important. Accounting is the language of business, and you need to be fluent. If you aren't, it is not too late. When you have time, take a moment to meet with your controller. He or she will help translate this foreign language. Here are a few questions to help get you started:

- What are the three financial statements, and how are they related?
- Please explain the formula "Assets = Liabilities + Equity".
- Do you agree that accounting is the language of business? Why?
- Can I peruse copies of the most current financial statements?
- What are cost of goods sold? operating income? net income?

These questions get you started in understanding the role of accounting in the hospitality industry. As you continue to learn these concepts, you will want to further your education in the accounting concepts, but also master management report comprehension (daily labor, rooms forecast, star report, etc), financial statement analysis, budgeting and forecasting, operations and logistics, inventory management, revenue management, and finance ... to name a few. If your mentors are too busy to help you, consider seeking outside assistance.

Appearance: Simply put, you need to have a polished appearance. Try to put yourself in your GM's shoes when (s)he gives a tour of the hotel to his family. Who will get introduced to the family? Given a choice, the people dressed nicely with proper hygiene and well-mannered meet the family. I believe there is a strong correlation between promotability and face-time with the GM. Oh, and eliminating slang from your vocabulary helps too.

Strengths: Most of you are familiar with the traditional strengths that hiring managers seek, but I would like to highlight some ubiquitous strengths that are rarely noted in discussion. Some of these are from the book *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham, Marcus and Donald Clifton - 2001):

- Strategic: Sorting through the clutter, and finding the best route. Strategic ideas often provide a long-term solution.
- Achiever: Constant need to want to do better. Never mentally clock out.
- Activator: Always asks, "When can we start?" Sometimes referred to as the "Make-it-Happen Captain"
- Self-Awareness: Knowing how your actions (inactions) and emotions affect those around you.
- Belief: Your actions give your life meaning and satisfaction.
- Communication: You find joy in explaining, describing speaking, and writing. The best ones know how to tell a story. Learn how to tell stories because their is a strong correlation among great leaders and storytellers.

- Developer: You see the potential in others, and this draws you to them. Your goal is to help them experience success.
- Discipline: You focus on structure, routines, and deadlines. You dislike surprises.
- Empathy: You sense emotions around you, and you intuitively see the world through those people's eyes. You don't have pity, but you understand them. You can help people voice their feelings.
- Fairness: Balance is important to you, which guards against selfishness and individualism. Diplomacy helps people know what is expected.
- Focus: Everyday, you have a clear destination. You like to set goals.
- Inclusiveness: You want to include people and make them feel part of the group, and they too can benefit from the support of the group.
- Learner: You love to learn. You enjoy the process of learning.
- Positivity: You are generous with praise, quick to smile, and always on the lookout for the positive in the situation. And people want to be around you, especially because you celebrate each achievement with sincerity.
- Responsibility: You feel emotionally bound to complete any task that you have committed to doing, because your good name depends on it.
- Restorative: You are a problem solver. This energizes you. You enjoy the challenge of analyzing the symptoms, identifying what is wrong, and finding the solution. Your joy comes from bringing things back to life.
- Significance: You want to be significant in the eyes of other people ... i.e. recognized. You want to be heard, and stand out for the unique strengths you bring.
- Team Assembly: Your ability to select a strong support team shows your level-headedness for assembling an executive team when you become a GM.
- Mathematical Aptitude: Simple math calculations in your head. I like the book, *Secrets of Mental Math* by Arthur Benjamin.
- Customer Service: Making people (internal and external) feel really good inside. When you get goosebumps, you did it well.
- Entrepreneurial Spirit: Think like an owner, and act like a manager.

I hope you learned something from this brief essay. To recap: 1) Take the time to create a career plan to ensure you make decisions that benefit your professional growth. 2) Accounting is the language of business--get fluent! 3) Work your way up by experiencing many departments. And remember, everyone is watching your actions and reactions. 4) Dress the way your GM or owners would (whichever is dressed better). 5) Embrace your strengths to help you do great things to earn a solid reputation at your workplace, but also help guide your career plan.

Only you control your reputation. Every decision you make impacts people's perception of you as a person and leader. Be aware of this. Finally, I end with a contradiction: Although you are working hard to make yourself better, it's really not about you. It's about everyone else and how you affect them. How you make them smile, make their job easier, or help them when they need you most. You are developing relationships. Remember that, and you will go far.

Thank you for taking the time to read this narrative. If you ever find that you need outside, unbiased advice, please contact me anytime. I am delighted to help.

Sincerely,

Allan R. Perales, CEO
Blink Hospitality
allan@blinkhospitality.com
mobile: 312-852-5526
www.blinkhospitality.com

P.S. Here are some notable resources that continue to assist my career development

- Education:
 - AHLA Educational Foundation: <http://www.ahlef.org/> (certifications, textbooks)
 - MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) Open Courseware: <http://ocw.mit.edu>
 - The Chicago Public Libraries (this is free!)
- Publications:
 - <http://www.hotelnewsnow.com> (especially read "5 things to know")
 - Wall Street Journal
 - The Economist
 - Hoover's Company Records: http://www.chipublib.org/cplbooksmovies/research/bus_directories.php
- Books:
 - Strunk, William and E.B. White, Elements of Style. 2000.
 - Benjamin, Arthur and Michael Shermer, Secrets of Mental Math. 2006.
 - Buckingham, Marcus and Donald Clifton, Now, Discover Your Strengths. 2001.

Blink Hospitality is hospitality education and career coaching company that performs outsourced training on behalf of our clients: individuals and companies. Individuals come to us with specific education requirements and career coaching needs. Companies, instead of using their own internal training force, outsource to us and we do it for them. We specialize in teaching the concepts of financial accounting and its application in the workplace.