



LEAD WITHINER CONFIDENCE

WORDS Peter Vogel

Interior management demands passion and varied skills, most of which are learned outside the classroom. A fleet hospitality manager for three high-profile yachts shares the most important lessons he learned about managing an interior team.

It is a beautiful sunny morning; a humpback whale jumps out of the ice-cold Antarctic water and provides a spectacular show right in front of the yacht; a great vibe has taken over the yacht on which I work. Seeing the excitement in the eyes of my bosses, their family and guests makes it all worthwhile. We have been working very hard as a team to create an unforgettable experience. The planning of a trip like this has been extreme, with many people involved. With over 30 guests and more than 60 crew, we are now in Antarctica having the time of our lives.

Visiting the Antarctic Peninsula onboard a superyacht is the highlight of my career thus far – a career that has taken me across the globe, multiple times. As Fleet Hospitality Manager I was responsible for the running of the interior onboard three yachts: MY *OCTOPUS*, MY *Tatoosh* and MY *Meduse*. Just imagine what managing the interior departments included: the planning for the interior warranty and refit periods; maintaining the interior crew standards; the budget planning; event and destination management; crew welfare and – last but not least – the ever-so-important human resources element. Although this might sound like a crazy amount of work, I truly loved every minute of it. I felt alive and I had a great deal of support from the owners, all my team members, the other departments, captains and shoreside management. Certain key lessons enabled me to lead an interior team that, no matter what the size of the vessel, will help you to provide the best service possible to your guests.

FOCUS ON YOUR ROLE

In the early days of my career, I got along very well with Madame. We shopped every day and we went out every night. Although I loved this aspect of my job, I knew she

was unhappy with the service onboard. After a few guest trips I told her I could fix the issues but I should perhaps stay onboard and do my job as chief steward. I said I could fix all the “little” issues and find her another shopper for her trips, so she gave me the green light. Finally I was able to organise the team the way I should have done from the beginning; I put structure in place and created a warm, personalised service that focused on details, habits and preferences.

BUILD THE BEST TEAM POSSIBLE

The only way to manage a large number of projects and team members at one time is to keep a “bigger picture” view on everything that takes place. Create a strong structure with qualified people and ensure that the crew remains motivated. Care for the individual team members, think about their wishes, identify their talents and foster these by determining where each is best suited within your team. When all of this is in place, keep monitoring the team closely, ensure that you nip gossip in the bud immediately and stay focused on the end goal: owner satisfaction. Without your team, you are nothing; without your tools, as a chief steward/ess you are worthless.

BAN EGOS

Why does an interior department not always run smoothly? What is it that brings these interior professionals to shine? The answer is teamwork. Forget about egos, these will never sustain in our environment. If you make each individual understand that it is not they, their chief, their captain or fellow crewmembers who are most important but it is the owners and guests, you have just formed a winning team. My advice for anyone managing a team of interior professionals is to stay

grounded and humble. Be the best you can at any time, ensure that you keep a bird’s eye view of what is going on and always keep in mind that you are fortunate to be working onboard a floating hotel. It was your choice to do so and it is your choice to finish it and go elsewhere when the time has come.

DELEGATE RESPONSIBILITY

Remember that you do not have to be a martyr to the yacht and you do not have to run the show the whole time – you will feel calmer along the way. As the chief steward/ess it is important to stay in control behind the scenes. Your overall service will appear smoother and your captain will feel that you are in full control of your team members. It is important you let your guests know that although you are always available, you have hired a great team in which you have placed trust and responsibility to handle guest needs. Not only will you garner respect from your team members – it is a great compliment that you feel you can trust them – it will also buy you some peace and quiet time.

In order to place this trust in your team you, or an external company, need to train your crew to the best of your ability. Onboard I used to run training sessions constantly but as I am not a specialist in every field of hospitality and management, I reached out to specialist companies at least once a year in order to keep the team on top of their game. “A day not learned is a day not lived,” my mother used to say, and I still strongly believe that she is right.

KNOW YOUR WEAKNESSES

As a manager you cannot be the best at everything, you need to understand your strengths and weaknesses and delegate responsibility to those in your team who are stronger at certain aspects of service. By hiring qualified crew around you, you are therefore able to raise the level of service that the yacht can provide. For example, I would always hire someone with a passion for wine, someone who possessed a wealth of knowledge and education in that field, as I knew that this was one of my serious weaknesses. Recognising your weakness is a strength for anyone out there building a team of professionals; realise this and deal with it to ensure maximum result.

INSTILL CONFIDENCE

I once worked with an amazingly passionate maître d’ but although he was fantastic at charming the guests – which I picked up from him – he was pretty damn annoying to work for. He would not respect me, none of my ideas was ever listened to and he made me feel pretty useless at

times. I learned from him that I never want to manage like this. On the other hand, when I joined Seabourn Cruiseline I had a manager who continually made his team smile; all day he would ensure each team member felt great about themselves, their job and their guests. He instilled a great sense of self worth in everybody around him through little things – such as noticing the way I addressed the guests by name after the first day or the elegance of service at my station that evening. He was sharp and picked up on the little things from miles away; I vowed to myself that when I started managing my own team, I would be like him.

THE MEANING OF SERVICE

By definition service is “an act of helpful activity; help; aid”. I think we would all agree that we receive good service very sporadically – it is great when you receive it and horrible when not. In my opinion the best service is unique to each recipient, who has his or her own style; every situation requires a different approach. The best service is personalised, caring, attentive and professional. It has nothing to do with Michelin stars or money. It has nothing to do with being formal, informal or casual. And it has nothing to do with outrageous table decorations. It is about the person or team providing the service. The best team will understand the yacht’s systems as well as the guests’ history, habits and preferences.

I will finish with another anecdote about the Antarctica trip’s preparation. Thinking outside the box is a quality that every chief steward/ess should possess. When I walked off the boat in Punta Arenas, Chile to go to the local market I stumbled upon a penguin – not your average penguin but one in fancy dress. She was cute and I asked if she wanted to sell me her suit. She said she needed it to earn her wages and I accepted her reasoning so continued shopping. But while going about my tasks I kept thinking how much fun it would be to have the penguin suit for our guests’ arrival. The second time I passed her I made an offer she could not refuse. The penguin suit came home with me and I was convinced I would be able to persuade someone to wear it. Needless to say, I ended up wearing the suit myself; being 6ft 1in it was a rather long-legged variety of penguin! The guests loved every minute of it. On the day of the guests’ departure I went shopping with one of the principals and then directly to the airport. Without putting the idea to them, I later found out that one of my team had dressed up as the penguin and to wave goodbye to the guests. When I found out about this, all I could do was smile. ■

Peter Vogel is Managing Director of Triple S Consultancy. tripleSconsultancy.com