12 Social Responsibility – Your Employees

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Learning goals

After studying this chapter, readers will have the ability to:

1 Understand the relevance of the social dimension of sustainability from both a sustainable development and a business economic perspective;

2 Understand the relevance of working conditions, salary, empowerment and development of employees;

3 Understand the relevance of embracing diversity;

4 Understand the fact that proper working conditions and salary, empowerment and development of employees, and embracing diversity do not represent a technical challenge but a choice;

5 Understand the benefits of good working conditions and salary, empowerment, development, engagement of employees, and embracing diversity for sustainability initiatives in general, and for the planet and profit dimensions in particular; and

6 Understand the relevance and benefits of creating a sustainability-oriented organizational culture.

Introduction

Sustainable development is increasingly important to and applied within the hospitality sector. Interestingly, efforts in this field often prioritize environmental issues above social ones (Cavagnaro, 2017: 377). This is remarkable, given that hospitality is an industry with a people-oriented nature, which is dependent on the quality of its relationships with others on all levels of the socio-economic system (Melissen, 2017: 2). Therefore, one would expect this sector to invest significantly in this dimension of sustainability. Unfortunately, short-term cost reduction strategies, such as eco-efficient practices, are instead prioritized (see Chapter 1 and Cavagnaro, 2017: 377).

Best cases

Case 12.1: The inclusive project 'Hotel with 6 stars' of the Meliá Roma Aurelia Antica

At the Meliá Roma Aurelia Antica, part of Meliá Hotels International (MHI), something extraordinary is taking place. Together with the Italian Association of People with Down Syndrome, the project 'Hotel with 6 stars' was set up, aimed at closing the gap between youngster with Down Syndrome and the labour market. Six youngsters were selected and offered professional experience in a real work environment. They became the 'six stars' of the hotel. At MHI, sustainability has been part of the company from the start. Among other things, they are committed to protecting the environment, sharing the local culture and contributing to cultural integration, which all reflect their fundamental values and are embedded in the company´s strategy, processes and procedures. Within these, the social and environmental dimensions of sustainability are equally present. MHI explicitly states that they value the social dimension, as "MHI's activity will only be sustainable in the long term if it is able to contribute to the reduction of social differences and poverty" (Cavagnaro, 2017:380), and look for opportunities for inclusion of less advantaged groups. With this background, the project 'Hotel with 6 stars' was developed and implemented at Meliá Roma Aurelia Antica. The project shows that it is possible and beneficial to include the social dimension of sustainability, and that by doing so value is created inside and outside the company. During the project, the six youngsters were professionally trained as hotel employees with a focus on their ability rather than their disability. They joined all departments of the hotel and actively contributed to the various daily activities within six different roles: receptionist, chambermaid, waitress during breakfast, waitress at the bar and restaurant, cook and maintenance. Each trainee was tutored by a selected staff member. The traineeship took around three months and was organized as a part-time job. The design of the working hours and job activities were adjusted to the abilities of the trainees, but at the same time they would be challenged to reach the next level. The following quote of one of the trainees illustrates the personal growth they experienced during the traineeship:

"I wasn't able to do anything at first … I could not match the required timings, the bathroom was not perfect … Yet in the end I managed it!" (Martina in Cavagnaro, 2016: 382). In turn, the presence of the trainees had a positive impact on the hotel's staff because of their genuine enthusiasm: "My trainee's passion, proactive attitude and uncomplicated approach to life are a constant inspiration for me and the Front Office Team today. His presence here represented an undisputed enrichment for us, from both a professional and a human point of view" (Tutor in Cavagnaro, 2017: 382).

These quotes show how projects like 'Hotel with 6 stars' can be an enriching experience for both employees and employers and how it informs the corporate culture. For applying such a project successfully, three key conditions are needed: "first, careful preparation with the support of a specialized organization; second, a thorough choice both of trainees and tutors; and, last but not least, an unrelenting commitment to make a difference by creating value for all" (Cavagnaro, 2017: 382).

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approach in which employees have had the opportunity to *engage* in brainstorm sessions, provide their own ideas and input or contribute in any other way to the initiation of sustainability initiatives. This mode of participation supports the development of internal motivation, as employees (learn to) understand and acknowledge the importance of sustainability and are willing to commit.

Research suggests that engaged employees are beneficial for both the organization and for sustainability, and the other way around, that working with sustainability can enhance employee engagement (Glavas, 2012; PwC, 2014; Melissen, 2013, 2017). First, having genuine interest in employees' ideas, and in turn, providing insight into the decision-making processes, creates work environments in which employees feel taken seriously and valued (PwC, 2014). Involved employees express a feeling of being part of something, which increases connectivity and motivation for their work, and loyalty towards the company grows. Additionally, when employees have been taking part in the decision making process, they will feel more responsible for the efficient and accurate execution of the specific tasks related to those decisions. This is also a crucial element while working on sustainability. By informing and involving employees in decisions concerning sustainability, their understanding and knowledge of the topic will increase. And with a better understanding of what sustainability entails, support for sustainability initiatives will grow. What's more, working with sustainability provides purposeful work or work activities. Nowadays, employees are increasingly searching for work with meaning, work through which they can make a difference:

> Employees are living lives that are becoming faster and more efficient, doing work that does not fulfill them and with little time left to find fulfillment outside work. [...] Employees are therefore looking to find increased meaning in their work. As such, the impact of companies engaging in sustainability practices might have a positive influence on the engagement, productivity and well-being of employees (Glavas, 2012: 14).

McElligott *et al.* (2013) show that employees who find fulfilment within their work by directly contributing to social or environmental issues, report higher job satisfaction compared to their colleagues who do not, which in turn results in higher productivity. Additionally, the majority of graduates indicate that "making a difference through their next job [is] a priority" and that they are willing to accept a lower salary for meaningful work (McElligott *et al.* 2013: 5). Glavas (2012) points to the fact that companies which focus solely on profit might find themselves with a disengaged workforce as employees cannot bring their 'whole selves' to work (2012: 18): "Profit alone does not move some employees as much as if work was found to provide greater alignment with one's own concept of self, values, virtues and morals" (2012: 19).

Working with sustainability issues thus brings meaningfulness to the work floor. A division exists between meaningfulness *at* work and *in* work (Glavas, 2012: 20). Meaningfulness *at* work refers to the company's efforts towards

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