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Developing and Maintaining a Service Culture

'At Your Service' Spotlight: Isadore Sharp, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts

With a name like Sharp, it goes without saying that Isadore 'Issy' Sharp has some sound business acumen. It has been the Golden Rule that has given Four Seasons a remarkable record of customer service excellence for half a century. In his quest to be tops for service, Sharp's modus operandi is to 'treat others as you wish to be treated yourself' and this considerate culture has permeated all levels of Four Seasons' personnel.

After a background in architecture and construction, Sharp identified a niche in the hospitality industry: stressing quality service in mid-size properties with luxurious appurtenances. He had studied architecture

at Ryerson and worked with his father in Max Sharp & Son, the family renovation business. Then in 1960, he branched out to form Four Seasons Hotels, with a motel in downtown Toronto opening for business in 1961. The family element remained at Four Seasons, with Sharp at the helm and his wife, Rosalie Wise Sharp, the lead interior designer.



Isadore Sharp. Photo courtesy of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts

Aided by seasoned hotelier, Ian Munroe, Sharp was the first to introduce shampoo in bathrooms as well as value-added extras, such as 24-hour room service, bathrobes, laundry service, two-line phones, a desk, shoe repair and 24-hour secretarial service. His benchmark for excellence back then was London's Dorchester Hotel which inspired him to go one step further with the Four Seasons Inn on the Park in 1970. Winning 'hotel of the year', it was London's first modern hotel, even incorporating air conditioning in order to satisfy international visitors.

It is consistency that has paid off for Four Seasons which has benefited from the staunch leadership and unswerving vision of Sharp. His philosophy has always been that service is more important than fixtures and fittings. The Four Seasons website ascribes its success to Sharp's integration of the Golden Rule into the company's culture: "The reason for our success is no secret. It comes down to one single principle that transcends time and geography, religion and culture. It's the Golden Rule – the simple idea that if you treat people well, the way you would like to be treated, they will do the same."

But this was no business plan, according to Sharp. It was instead a moral thread that has lasted from the outset, remaining steadfast through all his expansion plans. One of the reasons for this consistency was the early decision to manage only mid-sized luxury hotels. This is the company's first pillar: "We will only operate medium-sized hotels of exceptional quality with an objective to be the best," Sharp emphasizes. He has kept true to his word with each and every hotel, as well as expanded the company's offering into branded residential, online retail and bespoke, global journey's aboard the Four Seasons Private Jet. The second Four Seasons' core value is about service. "True luxury will be defined not by architecture or décor, but by service. So we must make the quality of our service our distinguishing feature and a competitive advantage." Sharp has made a science out of anticipating peoples' needs. Third comes the company's world renowned culture, based on the simple premise of the Golden Rule, which guides employees' actions towards its guests, business partners and with each other. The fourth is brand, reflecting a decision to manage rather than own its hotels: "We will grow as a management company and build a brand name synonymous with quality". This credo has always been accompanied by external quality control audits resulting in hundreds of operating standards which are under regular assessment.

At Four Seasons, recruiting staff is primarily a personality search. Interviews take place over multiple sessions with in-depth behavioral assessments. Sharp believes that attitude is more important than experience in the first place as he can provide polished training once he has the right type of highly motivated employee. The interviews look for core values, desire to learn and grow, communication skills, attitude to service, self-esteem, word choice, interaction with public. He looks for 'naturals' who can provide innate rather than scripted service. When the Four Seasons Hotel New York opened, only 400 staff were