

Preparing the 21-century general manager for Africa's growing hospitality industry

 By [Robin Fredericks](#)

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With guest hospitality expectations changing daily, it's no wonder that hotel owners have upped their game in maximising leadership on their business frontline to improve customer satisfaction. As guests have the power to make or break a hotel's brand, it's become apparent that day-to-day hotel managers need to be well-trained, prepared for any risks that may arise and position themselves to tackle their everyday tasks head on.



Jan van der Putten

We chat with Jan van der Putten, Vice President of Africa & Indian Ocean at Hilton Worldwide about the role of the 21st-century general manager and ways in which hotel owners can better equip these employees to maximise their performance for an optimal guest experience...

What does the role of a general manager involve in 21st-century Africa?

The role of the 21st-century general manager involves driving guest experience, positive company culture and commercially innovative approaches in order to optimise the performance of the hotel. In this way, Africa is not very different from the rest of the world. Globally, the focus is on our customers, prioritising the people who will, in turn, contribute to customer or guest satisfaction when it comes to the hotel industry.



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■ *In your opinion, how has this role changed over the last decade?*

The biggest change in the role of the general manager has been digitalisation and the rise of public feedback through online forums and review sites. Potential customers are increasingly referring to these online platforms for reviews and the potential experience they may have with the brand.

These platforms often have greater influence than advertising due to the authenticity and transparent feedback from guests regarding their experiences.

For general managers and hotel owners, this means that the guest experience - and meeting guests' expectations - is even more important because everyone will read about it.

■ *What would you say owners expect from their general managers?*

The primary expectation is in-house profitability and maximised performance through optimal guest experience. Today, the visibility of satisfaction is so enormously high compared to the past and success for both the owner and general manager is about making an impact beyond the bottom line.

■ *What are the most challenging issues general managers face in their role?*

There are many factors that contribute to hotel success; and in the business of hospitality, in particular, the most challenging issue is to find the right talent and ensure that they are trained sufficiently to implement the culture of the hotel.

General managers need to ensure that they are enhancing service and profitability in equal measure. This is all possible once the right talent has been found and retained, especially in a country like South Africa where people in the industry tend to change jobs quite easily due to the considerable number of opportunities around.



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■ *Can training, education and traditional hospitality experiences really prepare you for it?*

Yes and no. Yes, because it definitely helps to be exposed to the industry and have access to learning and training as well as experience.

No, because at the end of the day, your attitude and who you are as a person – whether you're suited to being a leader in hospitality or even to being part of the industry – is even more important.

You can only train someone up to a certain point the rest is down to having an innate passion for the field of hospitality.

■ ***What can general manager's do to prepare the next generation of general manager's, especially in South Africa and Africa?***

Firstly, they need to play an active role in attracting talent to the industry and making the industry an exciting, appealing sector for young people to explore. Once they've done that, they need to offer opportunities for development and training as well as fostering a stimulating and constructively challenging working environment. The next step is to coach, mentor and guide people in their roles so that they can experience growth and realise their potential.

As we further our own expansion across Africa, our ambition is that via this focus on developing talent, we will develop a pipeline of local talent who we will see make it up to general level and over the long term have local leaders running the majority of our hotels on the continent.

■ ***Where should general manager's allocated most of their time to ensure effective running of a hotel?***

General should allocate most of their time to their people – this is key as the hospitality industry is an industry of people serving people. Included in this bracket are also the employees who carry the culture of the hotel and ultimately become an extension of the brand.

“ *Having the right attitude and the willingness to learn will take them a long way.* ”

If general manager's don't spend enough time motivating, mentoring and supporting their people, their culture is not secured. It then becomes difficult to enhance the business's commercial approach - and eventually, you won't need to talk to your guests because you won't have any! Once the culture and the people are taken care of, general managers need to allocate the rest of their time to implementing effective commercial approaches that deliver a return on investment.

■ ***What advice would you offer to those who aspire to become a general in the hotel industry?***

If you enjoy working with people and you enjoy diversity in your work, the hotel industry is a great place to consider. The general manager's role is never the same from one day to the next and the hospitality industry is a very interesting one. The opportunities and the challenges are enormous and the industry can also be very rewarding.

There are different ways in which a person can enter the industry and create opportunities for themselves. Some people are privileged enough to be able to go to a hotel school, which sets a good foundation for them, but this is certainly not a must. It is very possible to begin with an entry-level role at a hotel and work your way up.

Many of the bigger hotel companies offer fantastic opportunities through internal programmes and develop talented people in such a way that they can achieve a similar result to that which one would achieve had they gone to a hotel school. Having the right attitude and the willingness to learn will take them a long way.

ABOUT ROBIN FREDERICKS

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