

# RAMPING UP FOR WINTER

**Best practices for successful hiring, onboarding, and training.**

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**Have you ever heard a hiring manager say, “We hire for attitude and train for skill?” This has become such a common mantra that resort operators and human resources representatives may never audit the veracity of that assertion. But saying it doesn’t make it so. The good news is that there’s still time to get it right for this winter season.**

It’s likely your resort has specific plans to enhance the guest’s experience, investing in capital infrastructure, systems, products, and services. Marketing will have crafted a compelling story for targeted media. You’ll have multiple guest communication channels to get your message out externally. But delivery on that promise is ultimately in the hands of your staff.

So: how much effort will you put into hiring and prepping your employees? It’s the one strategic decision that most directly impacts a day in the life of both the guest and the employee, as measured by Net Promoter Scores and bottom line financial results.

Regardless of your size, an isolated or challenging location, or limited financial resources, your resort can leverage best practices that fit your culture in three areas: hiring, onboarding, and training. Your managers will expend the energy to hire and onboard employees regardless of whether or not you choose to upgrade the overall experience. Why not uptick your expectations when there is so much upside?

## AUDITING YOUR HIRING PRACTICES

When you hear, “You never get a second chance to make a first impression,” it typically describes the applicant, who hopes to become a candidate for a position. But candidates are also evaluating the impression the resort and its representatives make on them. The most desirable candidates have choices, and the winner in the competition for service-oriented talent is doing several things right.

Put yourself in the shoes of the job seeker. Do you make it easy to choose your resort?

Most applicants start by surfing potential employers online. When they land on your web page, what do they see? Is it easy to navigate to the “Careers” page? When they get there, are they immediately struck by how well it conveys your resort’s personality, culture, and brand? Is the online application user-friendly, or do they need to download a PDF, fill it out and scan to send it back?

It’s inevitable that job seekers will have to navigate an unfamiliar phone tree if they need more information than your web page provides. Even if they don’t have to “listen carefully, as the menu options have changed,” they often end up having to leave a message. It’s actually amazing when a human answers the phone.

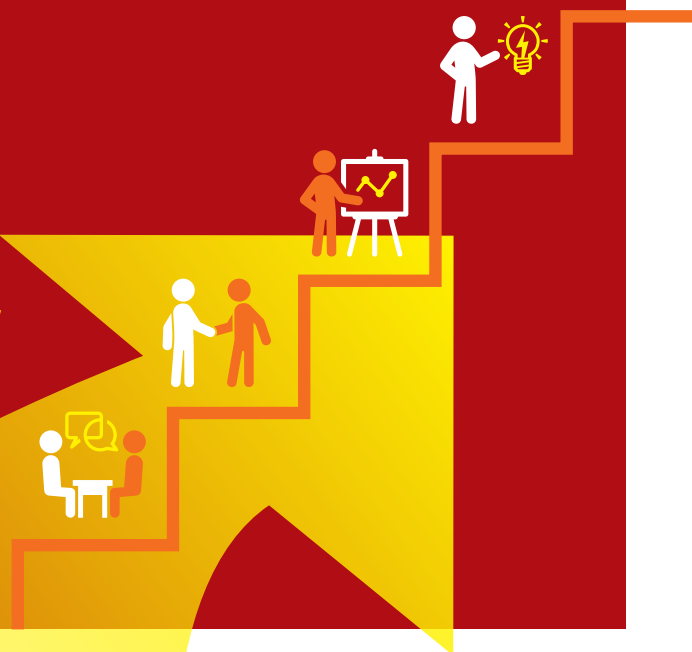
Should they expect a friendly, knowledgeable team member to engage them if they drop by during regular business

hours, seven days a week? And if your resort is paperless, is a computer available to fill out the online application?

One more challenge for job seekers: getting past not just one, but two gatekeepers to finally meet the hiring manager. If you use a robotic applicant tracking system to manage job openings and screen incoming resumes, highly qualified applicants may slip through the cracks because they didn’t use specific language. And the lucky applicants that rank among the 25 percent who beat the algorithms still need to impress a potentially overwhelmed or impatient human gatekeeper in the HR office.

A best practice in online recruiting comes from Squaw Valley/Alpine Meadows, Calif., where the resort’s employment web page contains a “How to apply for a job in two minutes” link complete with short video, job description, info about housing and benefits, and other items of interest to applicants.

If an applicant snags an interview, think about the impression your reps will make. Are we taking for granted their ability to connect with applicants? Whether the interview stems from an impromptu conversation, happens at a job fair, or is formally scheduled in person or via Skype, the hiring manager is the face of your resort, and should look and act the part. The soft skills that leaders demonstrate here set the example of how we ultimately want our team members to interact with each other and the guest. »



## THE ART OF INTERVIEWING AND HIRING

Leaving selection and placement up to hiring managers, without resetting your expectations and training them, is a missed opportunity. The training agenda should include more than authentic welcoming behavior (eye contact, smiling, shaking hands, and small talk) and avoidance of unlawful questions that may lead to claims of discrimination. Learning experiential interview techniques and how to ask open-ended questions encourages managers to be more selective, providing an alternative to the 1-to-1 applicant-to-hire ratio known as the “warm body method.” Without reinforced expectations to “hire for attitude and train for skill,” and the ability to discern and reject poorly suited applicants, some managers will accept the first 20 people to fill their 20 positions. They fear there won’t be others from which to choose, or they just want to get it over with.

## JOB FAIRS

Job fairs, a go-to for many ski areas, are often chaotic and place pressure on managers to quickly fill their rosters. So plan now to upgrade past practices. Consider the sense of entry, arrival, and welcome, and dress up your space with color, music, visual media, and festive decorations. Alternate videos of your resort’s adventures and team members interacting with guests with professionally produced images of skiing and riding. Use attention-grabbing signs to “feature” hard-to-fill positions.

It’s also important to plan. Competing resorts of different sizes often have staggered opening dates. You’ll want to calendar your job fair strategically so that you are not directly competing with another resort for talent. Ensure that seasonal managers have blocked the time, so they are available for set-up and to staff their departmental zones. Determine your advertising strategy on social media, print, radio, and other media. Reach out to current team members and rehires, and consider offering incentives to them for referring successful hires.

Ensure your management and other reps are trained, in uniform or logo wear with a visible nametag, and that their appearance mirrors resort grooming

standards. When they are stoked to welcome job seekers at their assigned stations, you are ready to open the doors.

At Sierra-at-Tahoe, Calif., it’s all hands on deck. The system managers have developed, and continue to refine, works. HR manages the flow of paper and people. Senior managers who are not hiring front-line positions often serve as pre-screeners. And direct hiring managers are poised to welcome front-line hopefuls in their departmental zones.

At Sierra, job seekers who need to fill out an application are directed to a holding area where fun elements and music set the stage. Those who have previously completed an online application are funneled into the pre-screening queue. Their ready-to-go application is printed in real time. Pre-screeners identify unsuitable job seekers for processing out. Successfully screened candidates move on to meet hiring managers.

Illustrating brand and culture is vital. For example, if your resort values “fun,” it needs to be observable, not just something you say in your mission statement. Melinda Stearns, Sierra’s director of human resources, suggests having departments compete to design creative job fair spaces. “The ticket department may string tickets together to form a welcoming banner,” says Stearns. “The rental department may make video games available to play as applicants wait their turn. Food outlets may choose to highlight certain samples and signature products.”

At a minimum, all departments should have pictures of employees having fun, as well as images depicting competent performance of technical job functions. Make sure that these first impressions are in alignment with brand images and external communications developed by marketing to drive guest expectations. The job seekers you hire will be responsible to deliver on your brand promise.

“Friendliness” is a universal hospitality expectation. Stearns advises, “Look for shiny, happy people who have their lights on.” Hiring managers know one when they see one. Encourage your managers to make an offer before qualified candidates move on to another seasonal opportunity.

Successful candidates should be hired contingent upon any post-offer requirements, such as drug testing, DMV certifications, etc. At Sierra, new team members enjoy fresh-baked cookies as they complete new hire forms, and leave with reminder cards of any missing documents they must produce, as well as next steps.

## ONBOARDING: NOT JUST ORIENTATION

Once you’ve hired your future rock stars, set in motion the experience you promised. We know that if new employees are not inculcated into the culture within the first three weeks of hire, they never really develop a true sense of belonging and pride. During the onboarding process, the new team member sees firsthand how the resort’s vision, strategies, and goals come to life. Multiple channels of communication are necessary to keep everyone in the loop, as well as a variety of training platforms and content to develop talent, essential skills, and know-how.

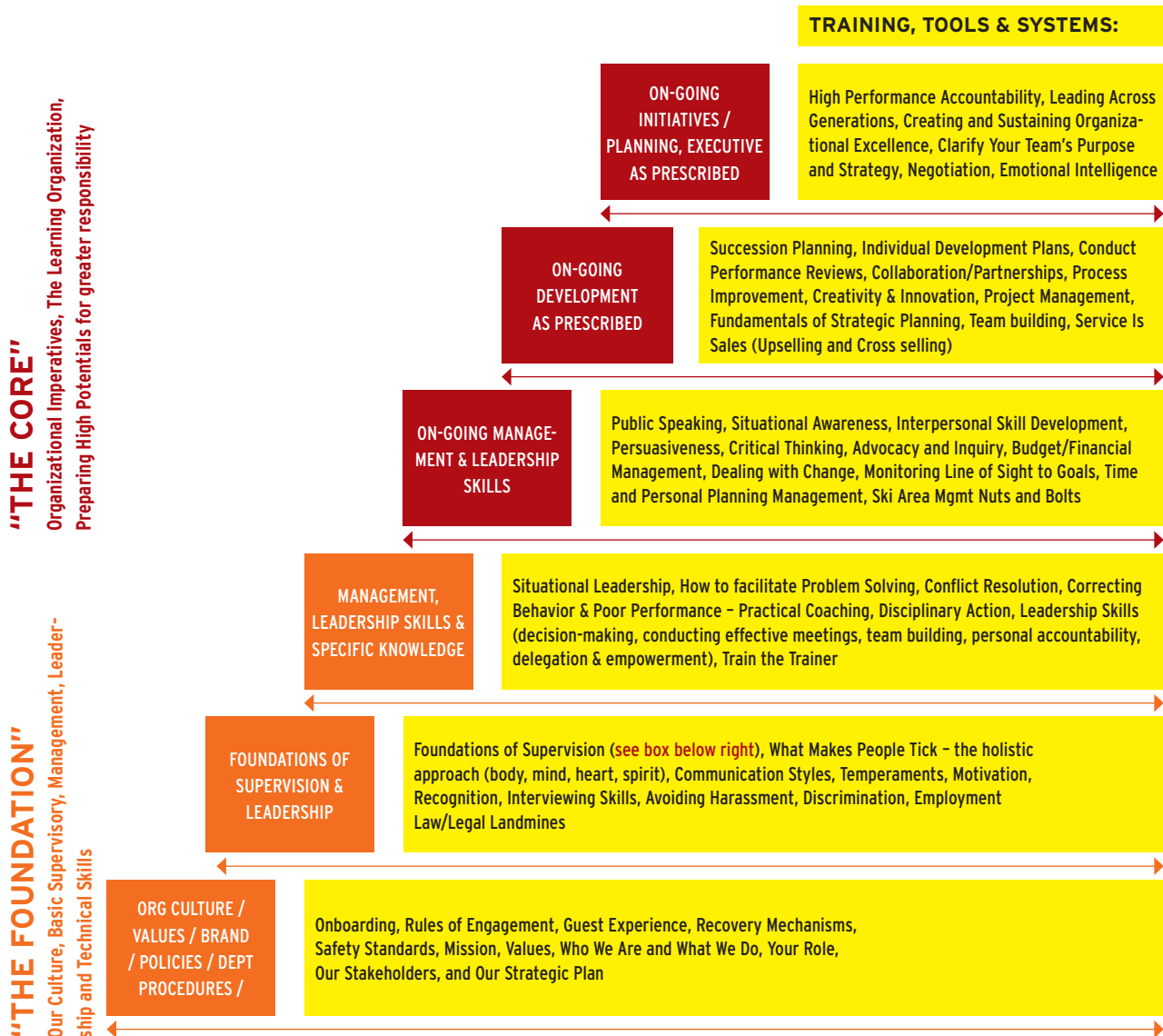
Onboarding is a structured process that can last the length of a winter season. In his article, “Circle of Trust” (page 43), Scott Hannah of Guest Research notes, “To develop loyalty, employees also need an emotional connection or engagement with the company, its goals and senior leadership.”

All resorts have the ability to leverage their strengths in this regard. The question is whether leadership will commit.

“Training” seems to fall into one big bucket for many resorts. In reality, there are four basic levels of training: onboarding basics; daily and weekly training opportunities for team members; training the trainer; and the sequential building blocks of management topics for leaders.

In early November, resorts optimistically project potential business volumes. Many adhere to cost structures designed to minimize labor costs during ramp-up to opening day. Yet, best practices allocate payroll dollars to support efficiently conducted new hire orientations and departmental training prior to opening. It’s money well spent: Consider the impact of allowing untrained, unpre-

# TRAINING AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT STEPS SNAPSHOT



pared team members to interact with guests, and the inability of newly minted supervisors to effectively lead when the curtain finally rises on the winter season.

And before you design your training, consider new approaches. If you haven't repackaged the content you were teaching three years ago, and it is presented in a lecture format, people are not learning, they're just bored.

You may not be a Millennial, but you are teaching them. Different generations may research topics differently, and there may be a tech divide, but one thing trumps how we all learn: Everyone appreciates a presenter who can hold our attention using compelling and intellectually fresh information.

Ideally, training would:

- involve a variety of activities and lots of chances to apply what is learned;
- move at a fairly rapid pace;

- use interactive learning and technology;
- employ real examples, video clips, and other media.

## TRAINING AND ONBOARDING BASICS FOR TEAM MEMBERS

Team members need to become proficient in four competencies: destination knowledge, resort knowledge, product knowledge, and hospitality 101. One best practice to further these competencies is separating new hire and rehire orientations. Newbies need the full scope, while rehires need to know what's new.

Be realistic about how much content you can really fit into a limited amount of time. Focus on what is most important for the business. The laundry list of policy and behavioral expectations (how to clock in, grooming and uniform standards) can suck up valuable time, but

### FOUNDATIONS OF SUPERVISION:

1. Assign & Distribute Work, Monitor and Control Performance, Review, Evaluate and Reward Performance, Train & Develop Employees
2. Lead and Motivate Your Team, Communicate and Over Communicate, and Handle Administrative duties

new software platforms, such as Mindflash, Schoox, and QuizEgg that allow for customized content and offer a testing component, can help. Diverting dry content to such a system can shave half an hour off the NHO agenda. The new team member should be paid to learn on a less-busy weekday within the first week of onboarding. The platforms track how much time is spent online, as well as the test score.

Such platforms can also be highly effective in delivering weekly safety information to comply with OSHA stan-

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dards. Kathy Chan, VP of HR for JMA Ventures, owner operator of Homewood Mountain Resort in Lake Tahoe, says her company has uploaded its safety content and tests team members weekly. She says this method contributed to a 15 percent reduction in workers comp modification over the course of four years.

Many resorts are creating professionally or internally produced videos to complement other learning methods. Though these videos should not replace real-time interaction, such as the GM's welcome, they can be used to take team members on a mountain tour, or promote destination and product knowledge.

Your team members—using smart phones, initiative, and creativity—can produce videos illustrating guest interaction and team member proficiency. Unleash your brand army by implement-

ing a competition to produce the desired video content. Tell them your expectations, with guidelines and a three-minute time limit, and see what happens.

There will always be a "high-touch" portion of orientation that includes cultural messages from leadership, interactive segments on fulfilling the guest experience, and service recovery tactics when things go wrong. Ongoing segments of interactive hospitality training can be delivered in bite-sized chunks through the season. From the morning 5-minute huddle to the weekly safety or service meeting, front line leaders are primarily responsible to make the content interesting and meaningful. Engagement and impact is all in the delivery.

## TRAIN THE TRAINER

Savvy resorts have discovered how to improve delivery and leverage training from the inside. Since it's not cost effective to hire a trainer for every

department, they carefully select and train high-potential team members as interdepartmental trainers—and provide them with content so they can drive sales, service, and safety goals throughout the season.

The beauty of this system is that in addition to upticking management's communication and delivery skills, the content can be customized based on resort readiness and strategy, and might include the following:

- adult learning styles and tricks for trainers
- public speaking and avoiding death by PowerPoint
- building and delivering department orientation
- delivering compelling safety topics
- understanding products and services, upselling and cross selling
- guest experience and recovery mechanisms

A well-crafted train-the-trainer program can facilitate infrastructure devel-



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## TRAINING AND ONBOARDING BASICS FOR LEADERS

Typically called “supervisory development,” training for emerging leaders, leads, supervisors and middle management is mission critical. Front-line leaders are like the filling in an Oreo cookie. One side of the cookie is senior management; the other is the front-line team member. Front-line leaders need to be responsive and accountable to each.

People love the Oreo filling, and it gets the most attention. So should this layer of leadership, as it has the most influence on the largest portion of the workforce. The behavior it models—good or bad—is picked up by team members. How front-line leaders treat the team directly impacts how team members treat the guest. As such they have the potential

to create the most liability for resorts in terms of safety violations, discrimination, harassment, and unlawful practices.

Accordingly, the front-line leader’s learning curve is ongoing, with technical, soft, and hard skills development all happening at the same time. Leaders never “finish” their education—and that includes senior managers and executives. In fact, when leaders refuse opportunities to participate in training, it’s time to worry. Our industry needs T-shaped leaders, who are as interested in expanding breadth as they are in the depth of their technical expertise.

Training your leaders to be more sophisticated operators and innovators should be on the agenda every year. It’s called “talent development” for a very compelling reason. It will undoubtedly require a greater degree of intellectual horsepower and management muscle to remain competitive and to thrive in the next 5, 10, 20 years and beyond.

## RIISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Upon full consideration, operators may be convinced of the need to audit current practices. They may even be inspired to upgrade hiring, onboarding, and training—only to change their tune when a tough season approaches. But if people truly are the most important asset, your best bet, even when facing a difficult-to-predict season, is to have the courage to invest in better selection, placement, and training. The path to a truly game-changing strategy starts with one single step. And that step can make all the difference.

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