

The Business of Busyness at Hotels



A new phrase that entered the zeitgeist in 2021 was ‘Zoom fatigue’ for what should be obvious reasons. Besides the strain on your eyes from having to look at the computer screen during yet another conference call, there’s far more to unpack here for corporate culture within hospitality. And this deserves a closer look as we slide into 2022 with what may be yet more disruption from new COVID-19 mutations and the semi-permanence of remote work policies.

During the early stages of the lockdowns in 2020, it was refreshing to see everyone’s face as they smiled into their cameras from each respective home office. It alleviated the pandemic panic, the gloom from all the hotel closures and the general loneliness from not being able to gather. Now that this ‘Covidmoon’ phase is long over, we must ask some pragmatic questions about the efficacy of all these video calls. Does everyone really need to attend every meeting? Are daily or weekly standups necessary? Unless someone needs to share their screen, can’t we just have a regular phone call and skip the facetime component?

Addressing the latter question may save your managers from eye burn so that they can devote their precious workhours to looking unimpededly at excel spreadsheets or one of your various cloud-based operations tools. Answering the former question, though, brings to light some gross inefficiencies that

are endemic to many hotel organizations, namely decision by committee occupying too much time and slowing overall progress.

While we would much prefer to quote actual historical figures, there's a line spoken by the late Chadwick Boseman's most famous character, Black Panther or T'Challa of Marvel fame, that demonstrates our argument perfectly. "Two people in a room can get more done than a hundred."

This summarizes much of the profound psychology of group dynamics and groupthink. In many large gatherings, one hierarchically superior voice tends to dominate the conversational flow with numerous others either sycophantly in agreement for whatever reason or hesitant to vocalize their thoughts out of some abstract fear of reprimand. Alternatively, the opposite occurs where an official or unofficial discussion leader seeks out input and consensus from all participants, delaying decision making and follow-up actions.

These situations are, of course, the extremes but they are nonetheless important to digest because both stymie growth. The answer lies somewhere in the middle and differs for each organization.

Regardless, you start by trimming the fat. Giving the power to your team to make quick decisions and to delegate responsibility greatly expedite the implementation of new plans and new projects; this is immutable although the degree of bestowed power may vary. With the travel landscape changing every week in stride with the mercurial pandemic news cycle, hotels need to be able to pivot on a dime, sometimes within only a few hours. Often, it can take longer than that to even align multiple executives' schedules. The solution therefore is to let two or three managers hash it out and execute, or at least present a finalized, singular recommendation to those with the right level of authority.

Hotels are notorious for piling on the meetings, starting all the way at the top with the weekly or biweekly executive committee (no offense). Everyone has to attend every meeting when a cursory review of the minutes would suffice – so long as they actually read the minutes.

This is what we classify as busyness in a hospitality sense; team members who justify their roles and salaries within an organization by getting as much facetime, screentime or voice share with colleagues or their superiors. The problem is, of course, that time is scarce. All those minutes spent meeting could well be cycled back into other projects like new initiatives, technology investigations, better guest service and more continued professional development (CPD) to enhance each manager's capabilities while simultaneously reducing their chances of leaving for more fulfilling work.

For many, meeting over-attendance boils down to intrinsic or ingrained insecurity. How will my boss know that I'm working hard if they don't see my face every other day? What will I do with my workdays if I'm not sitting in on these calls and nodding along or voicing my affirmations at the appropriate time? If I'm not on these calls, won't others think I'm slacking off? My boss hasn't given me enough projects to work on, so how will I rationalize my job if I don't make my presence known and constant?

There are some broad ways to address these personal questions, but each requires a fundamental rethink to how your teams are empowered and what their job descriptions really entail.

1. **Fewer meetings and fewer video calls.** This should be readily evident by now. Each attendee should be able to immediately prove why they need to be present. And this applies to general managers or other senior executives whose schedules are consummately overstuffed already.

Designate a minute taker so that anyone who can't give a substantive reason can glance over those when they are disseminated. Next, will a mobile call suffice? You can still use Calendly or Google Meets to earmark the time and to serve as a backup for when phone networks are spotty but save your eyes the strain and stick to just voice.

2. **Open-minded work environments.** The boss-employee dynamic is a delicate one, and it's totally natural for subordinates to not want to verbally disagree during a meeting lest they embarrass the boss and suffer the consequences. A good solution is to hold 'office hours' – at the physical office or stated in a memo so that everyone feels as though their superiors are approachable – where anyone can come in to clarify a chosen direction or to voice any trepidations over the current plan. The matter of 'safety' in this instance means that any employee at any level should be able to question or suggest an alternative without reprisal. After all, good ideas can come from anywhere, especially from novices or outsiders who can evaluate scenarios without the bias or blinders of decades working in a single field.
3. **Give your teams more work.** It's often said that if you want something done, give it to the busiest person. After you reduce the total number of meetings and delegate responsibility so that your teams are more empowered to either make fast decisions or coalesce their thought processes into a specific recommendation, you'll soon find that everyone has quite a bit of free time on their hands. Hotels have no shortage of long-term, visionary projects that are waiting to get greenlit, so to fill this void overload your teams with dense, complex and cranium-straining work, along with review deadlines to keep them all accountable. Another suggestion is to formalize a succession mentorship program as well as internal CPD courses with structured assignments and regular testing. Rewrite each person's job description, then challenge your managers in a sink-or-swim manner and the most likely case is that they will be able to tread water with the best of them.

With 2022 upon us, we cannot wait for a time machine to be invented so that hotels can revert to the way business was in 2019 with its superb guest occupancy numbers covering up much of the past decade's busyness which only served to dampen productivity. Successful hotel organizations going forward will be the ones that save costs by making your teams scrupulously efficient so that you can capably steer the ship while maintaining the leanest possible team.