

IDEAS LABS

PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING

Human Resources & Realities: Supporting Staff During COVID-19

Industry Topic Specialist

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Specialist Highlights

Positive, proactive leadership by the CEO and property GMs, who engaged personally and regularly with staff, resulted in 97% returning after being laid off. Actions taken included:

- Created an employee newsletter that provided links to government programs, offered webinars/ podcasts on topics supporting emotional and mental health.
- Provided direct financial support (e.g. grocery/gas cards) to bridge gaps until government program funding was available.
- Cultivated community amongst staff through fun, celebratory events (i.e., birthdays, games nights) and a private Facebook group with posts from all levels of management and staff, one of which went viral (Sasquatch).
- Created policies to help staff handle difficult guests and 'fired' guests showing inappropriate, aggressive behaviour.
- Researched, leveraged and tweaked existing resources to create True Key COVID policies, rather than reinventing them.

Discussion Ideas & Tips

A wide range of ideas from industry pertaining to how we can do an even better job in supporting staff and engaging employees were generated through the four Ideas Labs held with 26 tourism operators / professionals as of Nov 5, 2020.

Understand the Changing Needs of Employees

- Speaking one-on-one with staff can help in understanding their issues and needs so that appropriate supports can be provided.
- Job security concerns can be addressed through continuous, honest communication, affirming a commitment to re-hiring them (where feasible); provision of links to government support programs; advising them of other employment opportunities; offering to re-deploy them to other areas of the organization.
- Health and safety concerns related to contracting COVID-19 and the resulting desire not to do certain jobs can be addressed by: listening to staff's concerns; affirming a commitment to their health and safety; creating, communicating and providing training on COVID policies; and creating a safety committee that includes staff representatives.
- Be aware of staff workload and be sensitive to burnout stemming from understaffed businesses.

Staff Engagement – Create Community, Replicate Camaraderie

- Newsletters, private social media groups (e.g., Facebook) and communication platforms such as Slack can be effective ways of creating community and keeping staff connected.
- For many staff, places of work are like a family and the separation can be very difficult. Creating ways to replicate the camaraderie they have when at work can help to ease the sense of loss and create loyalty for the employer.
- Supporting staff efforts to make money such as with links to personal Etsy sites in staff newsletters.

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- Keeping an open door policy and being more visible and engaging with staff can provide leadership with a better understanding of staff issues.
- Providing new/returning staff with survival kits can be a fun way to show support and caring.

Operations – Guest Facing

- Enforcing new protocols such as maximum numbers in a store can be difficult for both employees and staff. Putting a light system (green enter, red wait) at the entry provides staff with a sense of control and is helpful for customers.
- Ensuring signage regarding protocols and desired behaviours is in places that are visible to customers can be a helpful back up for staff dealing with difficult customers.
- Provide staff training (i.e., Verbal Judo) on how to de-escalate aggressive customer behaviour. Install camera to provide visual evidence and protect staff from aggressive customers.
- Adventure operators that conducted tours with private groups, changed their introductory “arrival meetings” with guests to a pre-arrival call/zoom meeting. This allowed the operator to address a variety of things including introducing the guide reviewing and discussing the policies, procedures and precautions in place and the implications of not following the rules. The pre-arrival session, along with signed waivers, health declaration and code of conduct resulted in high levels of guest compliance and is a practice that will likely be retained.
- Develop a “15 – 6 rule” – at 15 ft make eye contact and use gestures (nod, wave) to welcome guests, as they may not hear you until they are closer (6’).

Operations – Staff Focused

- Sources of staff may be found through new, non-traditional partners – True Key found success hiring through universities in Saskatchewan and using online career fairs such as Camosun College's
- Online training programs can help staff learn about new policies and procedures; experiential training can be another effective way to help staff develop and understand the impact of new protocols.

- Bring staff together to read through the safety plan/new protocols, having each person read a section out loud and then have everyone sign off on their understanding and agreement with the policies was a helpful approach that provided clarity and adherence amongst staff about expected behaviours.
- Cross-training staff to be able to handle a number of different roles is becoming an important way of dealing with understaffing.
- Job-sharing can be effective to:
 - Provide flexibility and support staff who want to work, but are unable to work full time, i.e., employees with children.
 - Provide more staff with part time work rather than letting some go.
- Employment contracts outlining expectations and the implications for inappropriate behaviour (e.g., socializing in large groups, partying) may be helpful in ensuring staff understand the situation.
- Where able, operators are paying staff to stay home if sick – it is seen as the trade off to having a sick team and having to close for a period of time.

Collaborating for the future

- Look at various ways of working with other businesses with similar values in the community including staff sharing and aligning business hours.
- Consider developing a long-term staffing plan that includes international hires. This could be an effective approach for rural businesses with a low population from which to draw staff.
- Chamber of Commerce and regional and destination tourism organizations can be a source of help and provide a forum for collaboration amongst members to discuss and tackle common challenges.

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Additional Helpful Links

- Various work abroad in Canada programs: [SWAP](#), [BUNAC](#), [Workaway](#) and [Global Work & Travel](#)
- Various COVID resources from Tourism HR companies/associations: [Tourism HR Canada](#), [Go2HR](#)
- [Brazen](#) virtual event platform for career fairs
- [Worksafe BC](#) – for BC COVID-19 protocols and the [811 Line](#) if have questions about staff protocols
- [15 Five](#) podcasts and webinars, especially, Rajkumari Neogy on [Belonging at Work](#)
- [Simon Sinek](#) – “These are not unprecedented times” having an optimistic view and infinite mindset
- [ProProfs](#) employee training tools

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