

HOTELS

PASSION FOR HOSPITALITY

Sounding the alarm on #MeToo



By [HOTELS Contributing Editor](#) on 2/14/2018

The #MeToo movement is roiling workplaces, but the hotel industry is especially fraught with its distinctive conditions: hotel rooms, alcohol and a 24/7 schedule.

Although many hotels have sexual harassment policies in place, there too often is a disconnect between policy and practice, industry participants say. Harassment of housekeepers, for instance, is commonplace, according to a U.S. union that represents hotel workers. Concerns extend to other workers, including casino dealers and F&B servers. And it reaches the top of the industry: Steve Wynn, CEO of Las Vegas-based Wynn Resorts, resigned February 6 amid allegations of sexual misconduct, which he denies.

This is a good time, experts say, to hit the pause button and examine protocols and procedures. While enhanced training can help improve protections, it will take longer to achieve the cultural change that will get female employees into high-level, influential positions, women professionals say. Promoting more women into senior management would prompt hotels to adopt more proactive policies to address harassment and give hourly workers more confidence to handle uncomfortable situations or to step forward.

“Employers are facing a watershed moment,” said Kelly Thorig, New York-based employment practices liability insurance product leader at risk management giant Marsh. “Everyone has to do something.”

Going public

Hoteliers should dump the old maxim “the customer is always right,” said Carl Braunlich, associate professor at the University of Nevada Las Vegas’ William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration. “That idea is still ingrained in what we do,” he said. “But the customer is not always right, and that’s difficult to admit.”

Part of that reform requires companies to stop the practice of settling complaints by private arbitration and requiring victims to sign confidentiality agreements – the legal underpinning that enabled American film producer Harvey Weinstein and other harassers to get away with bad behavior for so long. There’s impetus to eliminate forced arbitration of sexual harassment claims, Thorig said. But there has to be latitude for both sides – a victim, for example, may request his or her case remains private.

Given the high turnover in the industry, training should be ongoing and thorough. The message must come from the top that sexual harassment complaints are taken seriously, said Diego Bufquin, assistant professor at the University of Central Florida Rosen College of Hospitality Management. Managers need to tell employees, “We will have your back no matter what,” he said. Prominent signs in guest rooms and public areas help to discourage unacceptable conduct, he added.

Stepped-up training must extend to human resources managers who address harassment claims. “HR managers are there to recruit and train, but they don’t always know how to handle this kind of conflict,” Braunlich said. “They’re not psychologists.”

Representation

HOTELS contacted companies including Marriott International, IHG and Hyatt Hotels; all declined to discuss specifically how they are responding to the changing paradigm. A spokeswoman for the American Hospitality & Lodging Association (AHLA) said the industry has made employee and guest safety a top priority. “AHLA has partnered with nationally recognized nonprofits and developed tailored trainings for the industry,” the spokeswoman said. “Our industry has in place procedures and protocols for employees around reporting and prevention, and these are continuously reviewed and updated. As an industry we will continue our work day in and day out with a focus on ensuring America’s hotels are secure places for all those who work and visit them.”

A broader concern is the representation of women in senior management at hospitality companies. The odds are 3-to-1 against a woman winning promotion to the vice president level, said Peggy Berg, founder of the Atlanta-based Castell Project, a nonprofit striving to advance the careers of women in hospitality. An analysis of the STR Directory of Hotel and Lodging Companies by Castell found that as of 2016, women represented only 5% of CEO positions, 9% of president posts and 9% of partner positions. Fifteen percent of C-suite positions were held by women.

Kate Walsh, dean of the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration, whose research has focused on women in management and culture change, said the hospitality industry presents special obstacles for women. “Many run into barriers at the general manager level because they don’t want to uproot their family to run another hotel,” she said. “There has to be a commitment by the big players to develop all their professionals, and women are part of that.”

Fern Kanter, executive vice president and managing director at Boston asset manager CHM Warnick, leads initiatives to promote advancement of women in real estate and hospitality. “#MeToo calls (men) out, and we have to bring this to the surface,” she said. “Women need to convey confidence, act the part and educate men — not in a confrontational but in a collaborative way.”