

# MANAGERS FROM HELL IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY



Disaffection leads to lost productivity and performance.

The majority of employees are disaffected with their work and not engaged in their place of employment. This is a surprising but statistically validated fact revealed in a Gallup poll, and it has prompted Rosen College researchers to investigate how far it applies to hospitality. In what is thought to be the first study to look at the problem in the industry, research by Dr. Fevzi Okumus and his two former Ph.D. students reveal what hospitality employees have to say about “managers from Hell,” and what this means for the sector.

Most people come across a bad boss at least once in their working lives—someone who saps their motivation and stifles their initiative. The result, to misquote Timothy Leary, is that many employees turn up, but fail to tune in to their job, no doubt wishing they could drop out of it altogether.

A ground-breaking study by Rosen College’s Dr. Fevzi Okumus and his former Ph.D. students argues that businesses fail to recognize the size and potential impact of this problem, at their peril. A recent Gallup poll, for example, found that only a third of employees felt actively engaged in their place of employment. Half felt unengaged, and the remainder felt actively disengaged.

Aside from the impact on employee wellbeing and the cost of recruiting and on-boarding replacements for leavers, disaffection leads to lost productivity and performance. Perhaps more surprisingly, business management professionals believe that it is not companies that people want to leave, but line managers. “Managers from Hell” are found in every industry, but in hospitality—an industry that is known for its high turnover of staff and lack of training—they are particularly toxic.

Dr. Okumus’s research asked frontline employees to profile bad managers. Published in the *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, the study yields important insights into how managers should, and should not, behave if they are to actively engage employees in the business.

## THE RESEARCH

Dr. Okumus’s study explored the characteristics of bad managers from the perspective of subordinate employees, rather than upper management. The aim was to discover whether managers fostered a working environment that met employee expectations.

Taking a qualitative approach, researchers adopted a grounded theory research design. In this way, the theories developed by the study were based on the data gathered rather than pre-existing assumptions. The employees studied were frontline workers from a variety of hospitality sectors and roles, who had worked in hospitality for at least a year. All graduates from a university in the south eastern United States, employees self-selected by responding to a general invitation to give an online interview, in private and in their own time.

The respondents’ demographic profile was representative of the hospitality industry, being around one-third male and two-thirds female. Most respondents had a degree or some form of college education. Around 28% earned under \$20,000 a year and 42% earned between \$20,000 and \$40,000. One-

manager’s attributes and behaviours. In addition, employees were asked why they thought the person they described had become a bad manager, again giving details. The questions were open-ended and researchers did not give examples of what might be considered bad management.

Employees’ responses to each question were analyzed and coded independently of each other to detect patterns. Categories of responses were grouped into sub-categories and themes. Researchers then analyzed the data to identify links between bad manager causes and bad manager characteristics.

## BAD MANAGER CHARACTERISTICS

The research identified six characteristics of bad managers in the hospitality

and having poor decision-making and delegation skills. Sub-themes were also identified for each characteristic.

Unprofessional managers were reported to have problems with work/life spill-over. For example, they often arrived late for work even though they reprimanded employees who were similarly late for their shift. They also displayed favoritism, created drama, and interacted inappropriately with staff.

Poor operational and technical skills were associated with managing at a distance, a lack of core skills, and poor ability in project management. Some employees described managers who avoided frontline public interaction. Others spoke about either hands-off or micro-management. Many reported managers’ inability to create a fair work schedule.

Poor leadership skills were identified as poor mentorship, poor employee development, a lack of altruism, and being a poor source of inspiration. Many employees reported a lack of training. One employee described a manager, saying: “I worked for her for 3.5 years and she never conducted a single evaluation with me.”

Less frequently mentioned characteristics included managers with an autocratic management style. This was associated with poor interpersonal skills and a dictatorial outlook, as well as a lack of respect and passion for their job. While some were unapproachable and failed to give feedback, others would listen but not respond or take action.

Unethical behaviour included requiring employees to be dishonest and a failure in fiduciary duties contributing to a lack of trust. A surprising number of interviewees reported thievery by bad managers, for example taking food and beverages without paying, even though they would forbid staff from doing the same.

Managers’ poor decision and delegation skills were also cited. One interviewee said: “He would tell us vaguely what he wanted and left us on our own. When something was not done the way he wanted he would become angry with us, which was frustrating because he never gave particulars.”



The study explored the characteristics of bad managers from the perspective of subordinate employees, rather than upper management.

third had worked in hospitality for less than two years, 36% for between three and five years, and 30% for six years or more.

The study looked at responses from 72 people who were asked to describe the worst manager they had known and explain their judgement, giving examples of the

industry. Including both soft skills (such as interpersonal communication) and hard skills (such as technical know-how), the most common were that bad managers are unprofessional, have poor operational and technical skills, as well as poor leadership skills. Others included an autocratic management style, being unethical,

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### BAD MANAGER CAUSES

The interviews also identified four themes related to the root causes thought to be responsible for bad managers. The most commonly cited by employees were lack of qualifications for the specific role, and company culture and structure. Other themes included personal characteristics and length of tenure and complacency. Sub-themes were also identified for each characteristic.

Lack of qualifications was associated with lack of management experience, nepotism,

Factors regarding managers' personal characteristics included "misfit" personalities, personal life spill-over, essential character, and lack of drive. For example, interviewees described introverted managers who were uncomfortable managing a large workforce, as well as managers who conducted personal business at work and were dissatisfied with their own role.

Managers' length of tenure and being too comfortable in their position were associated with promotion based on seniority rather than

constructs such as abusive supervision and toxic leadership, this study reveals that in the hospitality sector there is an additional absence of managerial competence in both hard skills and soft skills.

This study's findings have practical implications which organizational policies and procedures need to address. The report states: "One of the causes of high turnover, low motivation, high psychological distress, and high burnout attributed to the hospitality industry could be attributed to an employee's bad manager ... If an organization can identify a bad manager in the workplace, preventative measures could be implemented that curtail the negative consequences of bad management."

Companies are therefore recommended to work towards reducing bad management qualities as well as to foster good management behaviors. The report makes three specific recommendations. First, that companies should consider the impact of organizational culture and structure on managers, and then prioritize managers' training and development. In addition, university and college courses in hospitality should include the characteristics and root causes of bad managers within their curricula.

As the study concludes: "The current study argues that future hospitality managers need to be proficient at promoting good management competencies while simultaneously suppressing any of the disliked management competencies identified in this study."

## UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE COURSES IN HOSPITALITY SHOULD INCLUDE THE CHARACTERISTICS AND ROOT CAUSES OF BAD MANAGERS WITHIN THEIR CURRICULA.

and a lack of formal training. For example, one interviewee said that she personally liked her manager but her management ability was insufficient. Many said managers obtained their position through friends or family relationships and promoted favorites themselves.

Company culture and structure were said by many employees to lead to managers finding leadership stressful. Other factors noted included lack of accountability and developmental support. Employees cited managers who were set unrealistic goals by their superiors, as well as managers who were under pressure to "make the numbers look good."

ability, and a sense that too much job security is debilitating. As one employee wrote of her manager: "She works in a department she is comfortable in, so she has no incentive to think of new things or think outside the box."

### IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has important implications for the hospitality industry. The first of its kind in the sector, it helps to redress the balance of the other reports which focus on good management practice.

The results suggest similarities to, and differences from, the general management literature. While academics have addressed

# RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Fevzi Okumus and his two former Ph.D. students surveyed hospitality employees to better understand the causes and characteristics of poor managers.

## REFERENCES

Hight, S.K., Gajjar Mistry, T., Okumus, F. (2019). Managers from "Hell" in the hospitality industry: how do hospitality employees profile bad managers? *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 77, 97-107. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2018.06.018>

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## PERSONAL RESPONSE

**This is fascinating and important research for the hospitality industry. As well as reading your report, and based on your own experience, what single piece of advice would you give to someone in their first managerial role in hospitality?**

Our research identified six characteristics of bad managers and four themes related to the root causes of bad managers. Hospitality and tourism managers can self-evaluate themselves to identify how they can become better managers. Hospitality and tourism organizations should provide specific and ongoing training programs to help their managers improve their management skills. Such efforts can reduce labor turnover and enhance employee engagement and performance.

## Dr. Fevzi Okumus



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