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People power

Rachel Argaman, CEO of TFE Hotels, is always looking for ways to give back to her staff and donate to local charities.

IMAGES SCOTT EHLER



The *CEO Magazine*: As a part of the Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce's (AICC) Leadership in Focus series, can you tell us a little bit about your relationship with AICC and how you started out with the Chamber?

Rachel: The relationship between AICC and TFE Hotels goes back many years—over two decades, in fact. It has been a strong partnership, and one which we appreciate on many fronts, not least for the exceptional events and networking opportunities made possible by the Chamber—from the official large luncheons to the more intimate boardroom lunches with top leaders giving their insights, and more informally to the willingness to make introductions at the highest level in order to facilitate business. This is an active and involved Chamber with a focus on commerce and relationships.

Networking and relationship skills are a primary focus for you in doing business. Are there particular examples where fostering positive relationships have significantly impacted TFE Hotels' growth?

There are multiple examples at every turn of our business. Business is built on relationships and, at the end of the day, people do business with people they like. >>



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“Across our global business, there is much we are doing on gaining a 360-degree view of the customer, which is critical in terms of behavioural targeting and really ‘talking’ to the customer in the right tone.” - Rachel Argaman

trust, and respect. One such example would be our investor relationships. Almost all of our investors have multiple hotels with us because of the trust and communication which underpins the relationship. They are collaborative, responsive and our partnerships are also characterised by fun. The strong communication we have with our investors helps to drive results.

How does fostering relationships within the workplace affect your position as a leader, and enable others to take on positions of leadership within the business?

At TFE Hotels we have long followed a leadership model called ‘The Leadership Challenge’ by Kouzes and Posner. The five tenets and practices of this model revolve around: modelling the way;

inspiring a shared vision; challenging the process; enabling others to act; and encouraging the heart. If you look at relationships in the context of the language of these tenets and ensure that all communication and action is based on good intent, then it always aligns to success in both relationships and in the business itself. If people feel respected and valued, and know that their contributions will always be noted and appreciated, then they work hard to be effective, supportive, and collaborative, which promotes success.

Your mentoring program was introduced in 2011 and has continued to grow. What are the skills and outcomes that you are looking to achieve through the implementation of this program?

The mentoring program was introduced after I participated in *Undercover Boss*, and it has been invaluable. I realised that our top leadership tier was getting too far removed from the front line of our business. Not only does this program support the development of future leaders coming up through the organisation, but it connects the existing executive leadership team with the issues and challenges faced on the reception desks, in the day-to-day operations of our business, and in the heartland of our customer interface.

As a board member for Chief Executive Women, how do you personally advocate and strategise to help women in business?

I am proud that TFE Hotels does not share the lamentably small percentage of women in our executive team that so many Australian companies have. Instead, our company reflects equality of gender diversity at every level.

We find that diversity improves the quality of our leadership, enables us to

call on 100 per cent of the talent pool, lowers our turnover, and supports strong corporate results. The fact that talented juniors of both genders are able to see a long-term future with our company enables us to attract people with powerful career aspirations, and it is then up to us to continue to inspire and develop them for the benefit of our company.

You’re also a big believer in nurturing your team’s happiness and wellbeing, both at work and in the home. How does prioritising emotional fitness help to create harmony and productivity in the workplace?

I think that self-management is crucial for every one of us in order to be the best leaders and the best human beings that we can be. A long time ago, I read an article by the *Harvard Business Review* titled ‘The Corporate Athlete’. It was about eating well and exercising; ensuring we are physically fit in order to be mentally fit for work. I think that self-management extends even further and is about understanding that work is a priority, family is a priority, and health is a priority. Managing your life is about understanding the importance of all aspects of one’s life, and balancing them according to the priorities of each and every day.

TFE Hotels donate leftover food to the popular charity OzHarvest. As an ex-director of the OzHarvest board, and a present ambassador for the organisation, how do you think corporates and not-for-profits can collaborate more effectively?

As an organisation, we took a decision a while ago to try to ensure that all our team-building supported a great cause so that people left as a stronger team, and with the feeling that they had done



something worthwhile to make a difference. So, for example, when we do investor or key client dinners we often work with OzHarvest to create a pop-up restaurant with a top chef and deliver a ‘money can’t buy’ experience with a donation to OzHarvest. I believe that clients and team members support companies that support communities. Therefore, collaboration on things such as relationship marketing events can generate goodwill for the companies and their key stakeholders as well as income for the not-for-profits.

After participating in *Undercover Boss*, you mentioned that you gained insights into areas affecting guest service, such as the tools available to your team. Based on these insights, how did you strategise to better equip your team with frontline engagement skills?

The insight was that we had to get out into the field and spend more time with our front line and ensure that their feedback was being heard. And that we had to equip them with processes for communicating their issues to head office. The mentoring program was one way of doing that. Another was reinstating feedback sessions—sometimes over drinks, or at dinners, depending on the hotel—with guests.

You were recently quoted as saying: “We will see the transformation which ever-evolving consumer technology brings to all aspects of hotels and travel.” How do you foresee technology and innovation aiding in TFE Hotels’ international expansion?

Across our global business, there is much we are doing to gain a 360-degree view of the customer, which is critical in terms of behavioural targeting and really ‘talking’ to the customer in the right tone, with the right content, and through the right channels.

Today, everyone is a ‘publisher’ and the sharing economy is a big influencing factor, so it is important to ensure that our own content is linked through the right partners to reach—in our case—a travel audience. Consumer-generated media is a whole new world. It is not about individual silos across SEO and PR nowadays; it is influencers and shared content that will sell your brand and drive business.

Finally, in terms of disruption, we tend to look at the new players and technologies emerging as enablers and distribution partners, and look at how to work with them and use them to help promote our business. ■