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## Mentoring in the Hospitality Industry: Insuring the Vibrancy for the Next Wave

Gary Hernbroth | August 05, 2019

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By Gary Hernbroth

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“You’re never too good to get some help.”

So says Shelby Hohenshil, 23, and just a year out of Michigan State University where she graduated last year from The School of Hospitality Business. But in some ways she has the wisdom of a wizened veteran when it comes to knowing what it takes to forge a successful career.

Shelby landed a job right out of college at the monster-sized Hyatt Regency Chicago, the Windy City’s largest hotel at 2,032 rooms. But she has no misgivings. She knows she didn’t do it alone.

“My mentor during my senior year at MSU played a huge role in getting me out of my comfort zone,” she reports. “The real world was coming up fast with graduation approaching, and through my mentoring coach I picked up networking tips, suggestions on setting up my LinkedIn profile, and how to make on-line and personal connections, which really helped me. It was definitely worth my while and a big advantage to find a mentor in college. MSU has a program for that, and I’d advise any hospitality student to take full advantage of all their school has to offer with such a program.”

### **Who owns the action steps?**

Shelby acknowledges that some students may find opening up to a mentor to be difficult: “A lot of people my age don’t seek out mentors because it isn’t in the forefront of their minds to do so. Sure, some students are shy, but they have to take that step to pick up the phone and reach out to their mentor, make the effort. They aren’t going to chase you around on the phone or emails, you have to be the one to work at reaching them if you want the help.”

Mark Auerbach, hospitality recruiter for Auerbach Hotel Associates in Orange County, agrees that students have to be the ones to reach out and not expect their mentor to go searching to help them. “Some students and emerging professionals don’t grab that lifeline, they don’t respond or take advantage of what the mentor is offering.”

In addition to students Auerbach finds himself also mentoring candidates during their job searches. “Some candidates need more mentoring than others,” Mark reports, “but the better I prepare a candidate and coach them on their resume or interviewing skills for a particular company I am representing, not only do I give them valuable help but it’s also a good reflection on me in terms of whom I am bringing up to bat. That helps the candidate, too.”

“I fondly recall when I was forming my own hotel career,” Mark opines, “Some folks gave me advice that really helped me. But it depends 100% on the person and whether they are open to listening to a mentor. I know a lot of people that would have got to where they wanted to go a lot quicker by seeking out a mentor and not thinking they knew it all. Knowing how mentoring helped me, I knew that I’d always want to do that for someone else down the road.”

### **Mentoring can go both ways, too**

Another mentor of college students and young professionals, Allegra Johnson, a former club manager for the Dunwoody Country Club near Atlanta and now the president of the Alumni Board of Directors at MSU’s School of Hospitality Business, gets something else entirely from being a mentor: “I learn from my mentees. By listening to them, I hear what their issues are, what are they concerned about. I get a good gauge from the questions they ask me and it educates both of us. That’s my #1 outcome – that we both become better educated by each other.”

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What do the educators say? MSU's Jeff Beck, PhD., Interim Associate Director of The School for Hospitality Business, understands mentoring is a two-way street, but puts the onus clearly on the students and newly-minted industry professionals to make the effort.

"You can't be a mentor to someone who does not want to be mentored or take your advice," Beck says. "You (as the mentor) can give all kinds of advice but the mentee has to be open to hearing it. They can't be a know-it-all. Mentoring is really a healthy dose of diagnosing what people need."

Is it possible to discern between those that are being mentored and those that aren't? Beck thinks so: "Without question, I've been witness to the difference between students who have been mentored and those that weren't. You can tell the difference between them. Mentoring has an explosive effect on students and young professionals as they prepare for their careers."

Beck offers three salient points to schools to build successful mentoring experiences. He knows it's a three-way partnership between the school, the students and the mentors:

- *Make it easy for the students to approach the mentors in person. Set it up for success by enabling that connection to take place.*
- *Prepare the students with some questions to ask of the mentors, to help get them started. Many are too shy to ask or don't know where to begin to ask mentors.*
- *Make sure you get committed mentors who take their roles seriously and responsibly. It's awful for a student to not get a response from their mentor on a set of questions, or some helpful advice, or even a resume review.*

Bonnie Knutson, MSU professor, who has seen many students and mentors come and go during her teaching career, is direct when asked what makes for a successful mentoring experience: "Mentors and mentees have to click. That's the secret, because the connection is the foundation. As my own wise old professor once said when I was a student, 'Communication is shared meaning', and it's still true."

Knutson sees a challenge, though, with regards to many of today's young millennials: "It's a lot of 'what's the answer, what's the answer' vs. learning the process. Attention spans are shorter these days. Everyone wants to get right to the fix. Well, you can't figure out how to connect the dots that way. And the real world customers ask you to help them connect the dots all the time, to use logic and deductive reasoning. More of today's students have to understand that mentoring is learning, and it's not a quick fix."

For Hohenshil, she learned that lesson out in "the real world" in her nine busy months at the Hyatt.

"In college my mentor was invaluable, and at the hotel my managers were really great about helping me and explaining things to me, showing me the ropes, and how things work around here," Shelby explains. "I learned to seek their advice, which is got me ready for my next position."

She chuckled at the suggestion that maybe she'll get to be a mentor herself for a future hospitality school graduate who comes on board to the hotel, just like she did after graduation.

"That would be great. I'll certainly have an understanding of what they will be feeling and going through. There is a lot to learn here and this can be an overwhelming place."

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## Everybody wins!

And therein lies the beauty of mentoring in the hospitality business. For the mentor (and I know this from my own personal experiences of being a frequent mentor), you get a sense of “giving back,” of helping someone without expecting something in return — just the satisfaction that you’ve elevated their game or figured out a tangled bunch of knots for them. You’ve given them confidence and they look to you as a “guru.”

For the mentee, you get the benefit of advice from a veteran who’s been through the wars ahead of you. You learn how to discern right from wrong, to pick up some tips that make the heavy lifting just a bit lighter. You learn from someone else’s experience, good or bad. You amass knowledge in many forms that you can put to use. Remember, knowledge is power only if it’s used properly.

So it seems that the magic formula for sustaining and cultivating the next wave through mentoring is fairly straightforward: You get help and coaching from others, you learn from it, you apply it and make it work, and then you pass it on and pay it forward to the next wave of professionals coming up the ranks.

What a great way to insure the vibrancy of an industry.

Postscript: A similar version of this article appeared as the cover story of the *NCC Meeting Professionals International “Perspective”* magazine (Summer 2019 issue). Although I wrote it with an emphasis on the hospitality business, the very same concepts will most certainly apply to industries of all types.

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## ABOUT GARY HERNBROTH

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(<http://www.trainingforwinners.com/>)

Gary founded Training for Winners after 18 years in the hospitality business, where he developed valuable business savvy and a wealth of experience in many areas including sales, negotiation, managing others, customer care, leadership, project management, opening a business, training, forecasting, creating budgets & action plans, hiring, and teamwork.

As such, he brings a real-world approach to his training programs and speaking presentations. He uses humor when appropriate, and strives to move his audiences to ACTION!

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