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MARRIOTT IN HAWAII ADDS AUTHENTIC TO HOTEL ASSOCIATE CULTURAL TRAINING PROGRAM

A Cultural Conversation with Hawaiian Cultural Practitioner Ramsay Taum

Honolulu, Hawaii —Trained and mentored by respected Hawaiian *kupuna* (elders), Ramsay Taum is a Native Hawaiian cultural practitioner and *kumu* (teacher) of several Hawaiian disciplines. While he may be gentle in his demeanor, he is extremely passionate about his “Host Culture Sense of Place Training” program, which is considered an extension of the teachings expounded by Dr. George Kanahahele, who coined the phrase, “A Hawaiian Sense of Place and Feeling” in the late 1980s, a period marked by concerns about the lack of aloha hospitality amid Hawaii’s growing visitor industry.

For Marriott Resorts Hawaii, Ed Hubennette, vice president of North Asia, Hawaii and South Pacific sought out a partnership with Taum who is director of External Relations and Community Partnerships at the University of Hawaii at Manoa’s School of Travel Industry Management to execute intensive Marriott associate (employee) training. Taum’s mission is to train close to 5,000 hotel associates including senior and line managers at the nine Marriott International brand resort hotels and vacation ownership resorts in Hawaii. They are: JW Marriott Ihilani Resort & Spa, Waikiki Beach Marriott Resort & Spa, Wailea Beach Marriott Resort & Spa, Kauai Marriott Resort & Spa and Waikoloa Beach Marriott Resort & Spa as well as Marriott Vacation Club International’s four vacation ownership resorts: Marriott’s Ko Olina Beach Club, Marriott’s Maui Ocean Club, Marriott’s Kauai Beach Club and Marriott’s Waiohai Beach Club.

Has there been any other travel or tourism company that has shown Marriott’s commitment to preserving and perpetuating Hawaii’s unique culture?

While others have tried, I have to commend Marriott’s leadership team head by Ed Hubennette for his vision, commitment and support in providing his colleagues and associates with a place based, culturally based training experience that not only aims to re-establish a Hawaiian sense of place in Marriott’s Hawaii properties, but also helps to create more authentic and meaningful visitor experiences by reinforcing each associate’s role as a host. There is a saying, “If it’s good for the resident (host), then it will be good for the visitor (guest).” This parallels Marriott’s corporate culture and philosophy expounded by founder J.W. Marriott, Sr. 80 years ago, “If you take care of your associates, they will take care of your customers.”

Why is it important for you to bring about the next evolution of Dr. Kanahahele’s work in relation to Native Hawaiian Hospitality Association?

“Contrary to what many might believe Native Hawaiians are underrepresented in the visitor industry workforce especially among its leadership. Furthermore, there is a whole new

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generation of Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian workers entering the visitor industry that did not benefit directly from Dr. Kanaha's sense of place teachings in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As our island destination matures, it begins to look and behave like all other destinations and if we're not careful, what was once unique becomes cliché. Like anything else, we need to spend as much time and energy maintaining and enhancing the people and the place as we do on the infrastructure and delivery systems that collectively make up the industry."

How would you define your teachings of *Host Culture Sense of Place Training*?

What we're doing is providing associates with a way of seeing their workplace with new eyes and enabling them to reclaim their roles and responsibilities as hosts, regardless of their job titles. This is reminiscent of the early days of the industry in Hawaii when travelers came to the islands to visit family or friends who hosted them in their homes. This is where lasting bonds and relationships were formed. Many of today's visitors don't get that experience, and those that remember long for it. Instead they visit places where there is little personal engagement or interaction. When they do get it, it is often contrived or disingenuous. There's no feeling in staged authenticity. No connection!

One of the program objectives is to help reframe the "service industry" as a "hosting industry" where the associate engages the visitor in a more authentic way, and the visitor acknowledges that hospitality in a more meaningful way. The greeting, "E komo mai," for instance is a heartfelt welcome that says "welcome to my home, how can I make your visit more enjoyable?" Needless to say this hard to do if you don't feel welcome in your own home or no longer recognize your place as being your own. Consider returning home at the end of each week to discover your furniture has been rearranged or changed, the food in your refrigerator doesn't satisfy your tastes and your family portraits and paintings have been replaced with stock footage of people you don't know and commercial art that lacks character, feeling or significance. When everything familiar is replaced with the unfamiliar, a huge "disconnect" results which makes it very difficult to genuinely welcome strangers in the spirit of *ho'okipa* and *aloha*. This is particularly true in cases where a new owner chooses to renovate a property in the interest of enhancing the physical asset by replacing artifacts, fixtures or other characteristics that makes a place unique with more generic ones and in doing so ends up removing the essence and the spirit of the place as well. When this occurs, we create places where associates no longer recognize their surroundings and the act of hosting becomes just that, an act and performance of carefully orchestrated and rehearsed behaviors. The host is effectively disempowered yet expected to deliver a genuine, quality experience. The success of this endeavor to enhance the visitor experience by enabling the host depends heavily on support from management at all levels. Our "*Host Culture Sense of Place*" training experience aims to re-establish a "Hawaiian sense of place" for associates and remind them that while the physical appearance of our work environments may change, the spirit of aloha and ho'okipa is an inside job and that the art and spirit of hosting is too.

What's host culture?

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There are couple of ways to look at it. On one hand, the host culture is that culture that is unique and distinct to a particular place which over time welcomes others to engage commerce and trade or to seek residency. That culture would also define the rules of engagement for residents and visitors alike. In short the customs, traditions, principles and philosophies guide and influence the practices of the place including governance. In China, Chinese would be the host culture as Japanese culture would be in Japan. Prior to 1893 and eventually Statehood in 1959, it would have been accurate to say that the Native Hawaiian culture was the host culture. Hawaiian language was used in commerce trade and governance, and laws and governance were influenced and reflective of the first people of the place. Today, the host culture of Hawaii is more accurately the American culture, and the host operating culture of the industry is a euro-centric, western corporate business culture that places greater emphasis on the guest than it does on the place and or the host. The irony of course is that we continue to refer to the Native Hawaiian culture as the “host culture” in Hawaii using and applying Native Hawaiian images, icons and practices as the backdrop to a predominantly western influenced practice.

On the other hand, host culture can refer to a set of practices, beliefs and values of “hosting” regardless of the ethnic or cultural origins. It is that culture, or way of being and behaving that welcomes and treats strangers like family. The host not only provides his or her guests with a place to eat and sleep, but does so in an atmosphere that invites the guest to participate and engage in activities that have mutual benefit. This kind of reciprocity agreement is core to the over arching guiding principle and value we know as ALOHA. When practiced in its truest form, people are left whole and places are better than when we came upon them. The act of services comes from a t mindset, which takes pride in being a good host and not a competent servant. Ironically this kind of “hosting” culture is inherent in the Hawaiian culture. However, today the visitor is a tourist, more spectator than participant, and the level of engagement is less interactive and is geared more toward well choreographed movements and gestures with little or no intrinsic value, substance or meaning for either the host or the guest.

How were you able to explain the essence of host culture to the Marriott general managers?

The place, Hawaii, is the hardware that comes with built in software, which is the root culture of the place, land, air and sea. Overtime, we introduce new software, operating and management systems to the hardware that is incompatible with the host software. In turn the place experiences a periodic if not frequent system failure, which requires frequent rebooting, restoring and renovating.

The idea of a base operating system or host culture applies to all places where Marriott International conducts business. For example, Disney created an environment where you know where you are. Mickey is your host. In Hawaii, each place has its own story and thus a different host. Stories about Pele the fire goddess may be more relevant on Hawaii Island while stories about demigod and trickster Maui would be best told on the island of the same name.

What are some of the frustrations you’ve experienced when teaching *Hawaiian Sense of Place*?

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One of the greatest frustrations has to do with the belief that you have to be Hawaiian by ancestry to understand and deliver a meaningful experience. This training experience isn't intended to make anyone Hawaiian. Instead it aims to create an atmosphere and awareness where the *ha* or spirit in each person regardless of their origins can live and be practiced in a genuine and authentic way. Another frustration is a mindset adopted by management and line staff alike that finds comfort hiding behind the "I don't know, I just work here" response. To be a good host, it is important to know your place so that you can share it in a meaningful way with others. Travelers make choices based on their sense of place measuring satisfaction against things like friendliness, affordability, and comfort. They are also looking for experiences that are educational or informational. Regardless of one's background and ancestry, all of us who reside here have a hosting responsibility or *kuleana* and therefore should take the time to learn about the place, its stories, customs, practices and traditions not only to share with and teach others, but perhaps more importantly as residents, take better care of the place that feeds and houses us.

How do you tackle the task of changing that negative attitude?

I subscribe to the idea that we teach people how to treat us. Therefore treat others, as you want to be treated. As Gandhi said, we must become the change we want to see. We also engage in the practice of reminding ourselves and others of how fortunate we are to live in Hawaii. Adopt and live aloha daily. A lot of it comes down to leadership. When managers smile while they work, so do the associates they lead. When management creates an environment where associates feel welcomed and appreciated, associates function in an atmosphere of joy, where aloha comes from inside and isn't just a slogan or greeting displayed on a wall. We see it in their eyes, on their faces and in the way they treat one another and their guests. More importantly the guest sees and experiences that too. This is truly a case when what's good for the host is ultimately good for the guest.

Why is it important that you create shared experiences in your training sessions?

Historically, leadership in most industries including tourism has been male dominated and influenced by euro-centric and western thought, paradigms and values. And while that is changing, many of the terms and concepts applied in leadership and management still reflect that history. As our workforce becomes more diverse in gender and culture, it becomes more important to adopt practices, terminology and protocols that are more inclusive and relevant to the people and their places. We need to apply metaphors that not only cross but also respect the inherent cultural differences while edifying the similarities of the human condition.

For instance, the sport related concept of "team work" is a common analogy employed by managers when trying to motivate the collective effort. Unfortunately not everyone in the workforce has benefited or participated in organized team sports and those that have tend to relate more to sports like football, baseball or soccer where everyone engaged in the activity is on the playing space at the same time. Unfortunately resort and hotel operations relies on individuals working on their own in different spaces, sometimes never seeing or meeting their coworkers in other departments or in the case of very large resort property, in a part of the resort that they never visit or frequent. Knowing this, we need to employ phrases and metaphors that

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honors and respects the diverse cultural, age and gender differences that now make up our workforce. Values are universal. The opportunities reveal themselves when we mindfully realign and prioritize the values with behaviors and practices that are relevant and appropriate to the place and the people who host us there.

As a result of your “Host Culture Sense of Hawaiian Place” training program at Marriott’s portfolio of nine lodging properties in Hawaii, what changes have you immediately seen among associates, and how have those changes impacted the Marriott customer?

The program was designed to reengage the associate (host) with visitors, but I have seen that associates are reconnecting and bonding with each other on a deeper level, making their work environment a very positive one. Housekeepers are embracing the changes. For instance, a majority of housekeepers whose first language is not English are using some of the Hawaiian language when engaging in conversation or “talking story” with guests --- Phrases such as “e komo mai” (welcome to our home) or “e kala mai” (excuse me), and other Hawaiian references. Small yet meaningful initiatives are underway such as creating a library at each of Marriott’s human resources offices so that associates may borrow a book on Hawaiian myths and legends or a Hawaiian dictionary. In that manner, they become excited about sharing the stories with guests as a means to create a more Hawaiian Sense of Place as well as an authentic Hawaiian experience for guests. All in all, the Host Culture Hawaiian Sense of Place training program at Marriott is a success due in part by the overall leadership and commitment by Ed Hubennette. In addition, he is to be credited for the University of Hawaii Travel Industry Management School’s newest partnership with the Marriott Foundation which is providing scholarships for Native Hawaiians who enter the visitor industry.

Editor’s Note: Interviews with Ed Hubennette, Ramsay Taum and associates are available upon request as are digital images.

About Marriott International, Inc.

MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL, Inc. (NYSE:MAR) is a leading lodging company with about 3,000 lodging properties in the United States and 67 other countries and territories. Marriott International operates and franchises hotels under the *Marriott, JW Marriott, The Ritz-Carlton, Renaissance, Residence Inn, Courtyard, TownePlace Suites, Fairfield Inn, SpringHill Suites* and *Bulgari* brand names; develops and operates vacation ownership resorts under the *Marriott Vacation Club, Horizons by Marriott Vacation Club, The Ritz-Carlton Club* and *Grand Residences by Marriott* brands; operates *Marriott Executive Apartments*; provides furnished corporate housing through its *Marriott ExecuStay* division; and operates conference centers. The company is headquartered in Bethesda, Md., and had approximately 151,000 employees at 2007 year-end. It is ranked as the lodging industry’s most admired company and one of the best companies to work for by FORTUNE®, and has been recognized by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with the 2007 Sustained Excellence Award and Partner of the Year since 2004. In fiscal year 2007, Marriott International reported sales from continuing operations of \$13 billion. For more information or reservations, please visit our web site at www.marriott.com.

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